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“ALL THINGS LOVED AND UNLOVABLE”: DISCOVERING SOUTHERN  
IDENTITY IN BLACK MIGRATION NOVELS

by  
Michael George Holman Jr

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2017

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## ABSTRACT

MICHAEL GEORGE HOLMAN JR: “All Things Loved and Unlovable”: Discovering

Southern Identity in Black Migration Novels

(Under the direction of Dr. Jay Watson)

This thesis traces the development of the ways that the South figures in the imaginations of black writers by examining Southern identity in three novels centered around migratory protagonists. The thesis examines the ways in which folk identity, urban landscapes, remigration, and gender shape the migration experience in each novel. The novels discussed here are Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. *Quicksand* posits the South as a place of unique danger, especially for black women, *Invisible Man* characterizes it as a place defined by oppressive memory that may be utilized as a resource for survival, and *Song of Solomon* describes it as the home of black ancestral roots and a potential place of healing from racial trauma. *Song of Solomon* also offers reconciliation for the two conceptions of gender within *Quicksand* and *Invisible Man*.

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## **The South's Evolving Role in the Black Imagination**

Two years ago, I read *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* for my Faulkner class, and Quentin Compson introduced me to the struggle to accept and live with Southern identity. I was reading his fear and anxiety soon after the long fight to remove the Mississippi flag with its Confederate imagery from our campus, so the significance of the uniquely Southern struggle between the past and the present was prominent in my mind. I was beginning to research a thesis topic, so Jay Watson sent me to C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History* and James Cobb's *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. In Cobb's book, I was introduced to the ways black migrants had exported Southern identity as they migrated North. The Southern identity that they carried with them was strong enough that, after Jim Crow was finally abolished, thousands of people descended from those migrants returned to the South, partially in pursuit of the ancestral memory they had inherited. I was fascinated by the strength of the affection held by so many African Americans for the South, even by those who had fled because of oppressive violence. I was particularly struck when I read *Invisible Man* by the powerful potential that Ellison saw in the Southern past. I was fascinated with the unique aspects of black Southern identity as expressed through the twentieth century, especially the role it played in forming Northern communities. The vernacular component that Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates examine was also a compelling difference between black and white identity because of its ability to engender

linguistic and narrative innovation. The black writers whose works I explored expressed complicated and nuanced feelings for the South that allowed nostalgia and criticism to cohabit in their works. As I continued to read, migration became the key for discerning the role black Southern identity played in twentieth century literature, especially in the connection to migrants' folk roots, and how that Southern identity was uniquely perceived by black men and women.

Since the trans-Atlantic Middle Passage, African American history and identity have been distinguished by migration. According to *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, the first significant black migration after the American Revolution was imposed by the economic need for free labor on cotton farms after the closing of the foreign slave trade. Slave traders moved large numbers of slaves into the Deep South between 1790 and 1860 (Grossman 180). This forced southern migration was contrasted with the small northern migrations of runaway slaves who managed to obtain freedom by fleeing to the North. From this historical period grew the slave narratives that are the foundational texts of African American literature. They expressed the geographical imagination that positioned black slaves and ex-slaves on a longitudinal spectrum, envisioning the North as a place of safety and hope and the South as a place of violence, enslavement, and destruction. After the Civil War, slavery was eventually replaced in the South by Jim Crow laws, and economic opportunity was limited for black people so that, through the oppressive system of sharecropping, cheap or free labor was still available.

Discrimination, racial violence, and lack of good work became the “push” factors that began the historic black movement known as the Great Migration. During World War I, “Northern industrialists, previously reluctant to hire blacks when they could draw upon

the continuing influx of white immigrants, turned their attention southward as immigration ceased and production orders began pouring in” (Wilson 181). Labor agents and newspaper advertisements offered higher wages in Northern cities, creating “pull” factors. The Great Migration created an enormous “demographic shift, which would leave only 53 percent of black Americans in the South by 1970, compared with 89 percent in 1910” (Wilson 182). Since the 1970s, however, “African Americans have increasingly moved to the South, part of a ‘reverse migration’” (Wilson 183). These immense shifts in population have been essential to the formation of a black American identity, an identity that often has found its root in a collective Southern past.

When black people migrated in large numbers and settled in urban centers, they were often disdained by longtime residents for their rural habits and mannerisms (Poe 9), forcing them to rely on one another to build communities that were founded on a shared culture exported from the South. These communities often used food, music, and religion, as well as other cultural components, to create unity. Tracy Poe relates the evolution and importance of “soul food” as a product of the foods available to slaves on a plantation, a combination of African and Anglo-American cuisines, and the rituals of communal eating that made these Southern meals essential to black folk identity.

Southern migrants developed a sense of ethnic identity around important symbols of rural culture. Food was just one of those symbols, but the primacy of two important ethnic values -- Southernness and commensality -- were so central to Southern foodways that it made them a natural vehicle for the expression of migrants’ sense of individual freedom. (Poe 26)



Another symbol of rural culture that was carried to the North and adapted to fit its new cultural context was music, specifically the blues. “Movement, journey, and escape are all essential themes embedded in blues music,” which made it a “pivotal force” borne out of “the African American migration experience” (Scott 128). Both its form and subject matter closely link it to black migrants; “the changes that occur in the music are intimately related to the experiences of the Southern migrant... Its confrontation with an unfamiliar environment, interaction with technology and capitalism, and resulting transformation and transformative activity all mirror the experience of the migrant” (Griffin 53). They often expressed nostalgia for home and, when performed, created a safe space for “community and regrouping” (Griffin 61) through the shared emotions of transition. Religion also played a large role in the creation of safe spaces and in sharing common culture. Migrants often formed “storefront Baptist, Pentecostal, and Holiness churches... Black churches provided another arena where migrants were able to convene community... [and] invoke the South as a means of sustaining them in the city” (Griffin 62). “Not only did it serve to keep alive the downhome religion, but the church also stood as buffer between these new arrivals and a cold, antagonistic world as the reality began to dawn upon them that they had merely exchanged one hell for another” (Hubbard 94). The spaces were places of refuge in landscapes that were, like the South, vigorously oppressive, although in different ways. In these churches, pastors shepherded and exhorted their flock using a unique oratory that grew to be associated in the African American literary imagination with these leaders. These cultural components, and others, adapted a Southern folk identity to fit their urban context, which helped newly settled

migrants to form communities and rely on one another in their initial confrontation with unfamiliar territories.

As the Great Migration was occurring, African American literature was undergoing a formative renaissance in the same Northern cities into which rural migrants were beginning to flow. Most scholars consider Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902, to be the first black migration narrative ("Great Migration in Literature" 491). Dunbar's novel was followed by many literary works that examined the role of mobility and migration in forming identity and the role that the South continued to play in an African American urban context. Jean Toomer's *Cane* exemplified and solidified some of the early tropes of these texts, portraying the South as a site of racially motivated violence (such as lynching) as well as the object of some degree of nostalgia. These themes were also explored by Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, and Claude McKay, all migrants to New York themselves who played important roles in the early Harlem Renaissance (492). The South began to take a more nuanced role as authors like Richard Wright and Ann Petry began to examine the invisible and pernicious oppressions that still existed in the North, though less obvious or overtly violent than lynching or Jim Crow (493). These themes continued to evolve into the 1950s as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Paule Marshall, and others continued to write about the South in the African American imagination. After the civil rights movement, migration novels began to take new forms as Jim Crow crumbled and African Americans began returning to the South in large numbers. Toni Morrison pioneered the re-migration subgenre in *Song of Solomon* (493), which traces the new conception of the South as a place of cultural resources and

potential reconnection. She also examined this and other themes of migration in *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* (494).

Scholarship on folk identity in African American literature and migration novels began to emerge in the late 1980s. In 1984, Houston A. Baker Jr wrote *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, an important text that theorized blues as a vernacular structure that functions as a junction of the often conflicting feelings and emotions of what would later be described as folk consciousness. Henry Louis Gates Jr also studied the importance of the black vernacular in African American literary criticism, considering the study of “the black vernacular tradition” essential to the task of “isolat[ing] the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other” (27). For Baker and Gates, rural Southern vernacular was an important demarcation of an African American identity rooted in the folk. Hazel Carby was critical of this approach, noting in “Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery” that “our ideas of an Afro-American literary tradition are dominated by an ideology of the ‘folk’ from fictional representations of sharecropping” (126). Carby is critical of a discourse that mythologizes the folk, conflating slavery and sharecropping into one “mythical rural folk existence... Consequently, not only are the specificities of a slave existence as opposed to a sharecropping existence negated, but the urban imagination and urban histories are also repressed” (127). The identification and debate surrounding folk identity’s place in literary criticism continued in scholarship that examined migration and the exportation of that identity to Northern cities.

The two most significant critical works on African American migration novels are Lawrence Rodgers’ *Canaan Bound* and Farah Jasmine Griffin’s “*Who Set you*

*Flowin'?*". Griffin's book was published first, although she credits Rodgers with first identifying the Great Migration novel genre (Griffin 4). She says that migration narratives are typically characterized by four pivotal elements:

(1) An event that propels the action northward, (2) a detailed representation of the initial confrontation with the urban landscape, (3) an illustration of the migrant's attempt to negotiate that landscape and his or her resistance to the negative effects of urbanization, and (4) a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South. (Griffin 3)

Rodgers also identifies three recurring tropes in these works: the stranger, the ancestor, and safe spaces. The ancestor is a presence found after confronting the urban landscape, whose "presence in Southern cultural forms such as song, food, and language sometimes provides the new migrant a cushion with which to soften the impact of urbanization...

Ancestors are a specific presence in the text. They are found in both its content and its form" (Griffin 5). For Griffin, the ancestor is a presence that strengthens or supports the migrant through Southern identity and memory. For instance, *Song of Solomon's* Pilate Dead provides support and connection to Milkman through food and song associated with the rural South. The stranger is another presence that presents guidance. "The stranger exists in a dialectical relationship with the ancestor. While the ancestor originates in the South and lives in the North, for the most part the stranger is a Northern phenomenon" (Griffin 6). This figure is not connected to the community and may be defined by its mobility or cosmopolitan identity. In many cases, the migrant is the stranger, such as Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Finally, Griffin identifies safe spaces created by migrants

in order to “negotiate the urban landscape” (Griffin 8). These spaces are the “locus of sustenance and preservation,” and are both “material and discursive.” They can “appear in song, food, elements of oral culture, the silences around ritual, and in dream sequences,” or they can be literal spaces “where ritual can be enacted to invoke the presence of the ancestor in the North” (Griffin 9). These three tropes are used in migration novels as representations of the methods migrants employed as they adjusted to their new homes, and some or all are present to various degrees in each of this project’s three novels. Griffin’s book goes on to apply these narrative structures and common themes to migration narratives in a variety of forms.

Lawrence Rodgers’ book does a lot of similar work while focusing entirely on novels. He seeks to identify novels that fit a form generally similar to Griffin’s, read them within the “historical situation of black America, particularly the endemic black-white racial conflict,” and “position the migration novel in relation to other African-American literary works” (Rodgers 4-5). He seeks to analyze migration as a kind of ascent, at least as characters often hope it will be, and he counts *Invisible Man* as the climax and epitome of the Great Migration novels. He is particularly interested in the emotional process of developing new connections for these novels’ protagonists, as “migration liberates migrants from the constraints of the South only if it can lead, in the North, to an authentic reattachment to an urbanized version of African-American community life that recognizes and draws from its undeniable connection to folk culture” (Rodgers 37). Some of this identity must be cast off in order to appease the prejudices of urban black communities (Rodgers 35), but ultimately folk culture provides resources for survival in

the North. *Canaan Bound* seeks to trace Great Migration novels' depictions of the process of adaptation.

In this project I seek to employ the frameworks outlined by Griffin and Rodgers and use them to trace comparative relationships between three important migration novels: *Quicksand*, *Invisible Man*, and *Song of Solomon*. By choosing three novels and examining them at greater length, I draw out contrasts in each that derive from the novels' time period and gendered perspective, contrasts that Griffin and Rodgers do not fully address. My thesis also focuses more clearly than Rodgers or Griffin on the role of folk identity in the adaptation of Southern identity in urban landscapes. These three novels were selected because each represents an important period in the development of the South within the African American literary imagination. Griffin traces this development in her introduction; from the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance until World War II, the South was written by Richard Wright and others as a place without promise for the migrant. *Quicksand* is an example of this South, while *Invisible Man* demonstrates the way in which the South gradually, in the wake of World War II and with the advent of civil rights activism, came to be viewed as a resource. After the Civil Rights movement, Toni Morrison's South as the repository for the ancestor became the dominant form (Griffin 10-11), and *Song of Solomon* is one of the best examples of this latest evolutionary stage in the genre.

These three novels are also important examples of the role of gender in stories of migration, offering three different views of the South as a possible resource for men and women. *Quicksand* (1928) examines the limits placed upon women, especially black women, that limit their mobility and ability to escape circumstances when they become

confining or unwelcoming. The South, in this novel, is uniquely dangerous for Helga Crane because it alone effectively entraps her. *Invisible Man* (1952) illustrates the potential of mobility as its unnamed narrator employs it to migrate North and move through white society, and then eventually to escape into hibernation. This novel, however, does not address the migratory limitations placed upon women, and when it posits the South as a resource, it does not consider the ways that Southern folk culture may be less advantageous or even hazardous for women. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a reconciliation of these two gendered positions as it examines the potential of mobility and its outsized possibility for men without neglecting the region's more ironic meanings and legacies for women. My thesis traces the presence of Southern folk identity in each novel and the prospective good that it offers each protagonist. The "ancestor" takes different forms in each text, but the rural folk plays a major role in the movements of Helga, *Invisible Man*, and *Milkman*. This project ties together three works of African American migration literature, each separated by a generation, and examines the similarities and differences between them. The chapters each follow a novel linearly through the plot, identifying moments of Southern influence and examining how the South functions in each, as a mirage, a resource, or something in between.

Chapter One deals with Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. It begins with Helga Crane, the novel's protagonist, in Naxos, a Tuskegee-inspired black university in the rural South. It charts the oppressive atmosphere of the school, which drives Helga to suddenly flee to Chicago and then New York. While in New York, Helga encounters black urban reformers, mostly members of the Harlem upper class, who have a paternalistic attitude towards rural migrants and their habits that is derived largely from an internalized

preference for white culture. She also becomes unconsciously aware of her own powerful sexual desire while in a nightclub, one of Griffin's safe spaces. Here, the chapter posits the nightclub as a way that folk identity is exported into Northern cities and adapted for a new environment. Helga is disturbed by her attraction to what she considers to be a primitive identity, and because she feels out of place among the black bourgeois, she leaves New York to live with her mother's Danish family members in Copenhagen. There, she is seen as exotic by the Danes and subtly encouraged to perform a Josephine Baker-esque sexuality. She enjoys the attention until she receives an indecent proposal from Axel Olsen that both treats her as an object and seeks to tie her down in Denmark. The chapter discusses Helga's disgust at being stereotyped even as she applies similar stereotypes to the folk influences that she encounters among migrant communities. After she refuses Olsen's proposal, she migrates again back to New York, where she encounters Robert Anderson, an old love interest married to her former best friend. When he rebuffs her advances, she happens upon a storefront church, another one of Griffin's safe spaces that mirrors the nightclub through subtle eroticism. I draw a link between the eroticism of the nightclub and that of the church service and their association with the rural South, which is what drives Helga to marry Pleasant Green, a black Alabaman preacher. She moves South with him, joining a poor rural community. She eventually becomes dissatisfied with the community and cannot find support, even among the other women, but she finds herself unable to leave as her body is relentlessly weakened by the act of childbirth. The South becomes her quicksand, luring her in with the promise of sexual fulfillment, then entrapping her through childbirth's leeching of her strength.



Chapter Two is on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It begins by identifying the Southern guides whom Invisible Man encounters and the lessons they teach him about black double consciousness and the use of performance to evade or deceive Southern white men. When he goes North, his opportunities vanish and his body is literally imprisoned. The chapter points out that it is the ancestor in the form of Mary Rambo, a landlady, and Southern food that rescues him and provides him with the strength he needs to recover. The South is central to the narrator's rebirth and new identity. When he regains his physical strength, he encounters an old couple being evicted, and he recognizes from their belongings that they, too, are Southern migrants. He rallies the watching crowd to stop the evictors, but eventually flees when the police arrive. He is recruited by the Brotherhood, a group of mostly white Communists, who are impressed at his oratorical abilities and co-opt him into the committee charged with rallying black support for their workman's cause. Invisible Man becomes a student in their cause and seeks to internalize their mantras and mottos, although he feels threatened by a subtle prejudice against him. When he preaches at a friend's funeral using a rhetorical style reminiscent of black ministers he is able to rouse the crowd to a frenzy at the injustice of American society. The chapter traces how Southern identity informs this rhetorical style and equips him to tap into a communal memory of abuses in order to unite the crowd. This power frightens the Brotherhood, who seek to check his power. Frustrated by their hypocrisy and inoculated against the pernicious effects of white paternalistic authority, the narrator resolves to deceive them using the lessons of double consciousness taught by his Southern guides. His actions inadvertently lead to a race riot, potentially orchestrated by the Brotherhood to destroy the rising power in Harlem, and Invisible Man withdraws

to the sewers to hibernate and contemplate his actions. While there, he realizes that his Southern experience is a resource that enables him to reach all people through discourse, and he resolves to use the invisibility imposed upon him by society to allow his words to do work within American society. The chapter concludes by tracing the ways in which the narrator taps into his Southern memory in order to appeal to all American society. It then contrasts *Quicksand* and *Invisible Man*, especially the ways in which each deals with or ignores the limitations on migration imposed by gender.

Chapter Three concludes the thesis with Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. It examines the opening scene, an attempted flight by a member of a black community in urban Michigan, and the ways that Northern oppression has subjugated black masculinity. This chapter explains the ways that flight signifies the capacity of black masculinity. Chapter Three then examines three of Milkman's guides. Guitar and Macon both teach Milkman the difficulties of being a black man, especially when haunted by a Southern memory of violence and oppression that enact trauma by harming those the black man is supposed to protect. Both men perform toxic masculinities borne out of this trauma in an inherited cycle of emotional violence.

Pilate, the third guide, is a counter throughout the novel. She is the ancestor embodied, and, utilizing folk identity and her own Southern past, she seeks to teach Milkman to embrace typically feminine components of identity in order to escape his own trauma. Milkman is initially unable to do so, and he travels to Pennsylvania, then Virginia, in search of a sack of gold supposedly left by Pilate and his father. While there, he is able to reconnect with his ancestral Southern roots, both through connection with community and the earth and by discovering his family history enshrined in a children's

song, an important piece of Southern oral tradition. He returns North, where he learns that he has caused the death of Hagar, his cousin and lover. This demonstrates the consequences of toxic masculinity for him, and he resolves to confront his past instead of fleeing it. He must follow through on his resolution when Guitar confronts him and tries to kill him. The novel ends as Milkman learns to fly, a symbol of empowered black manhood, and elects to fly into the arms of his brother in a final act of choosing reconciliation in lieu of fleeing. This chapter closely examines the links and differences between the three novels. It posits Morrison as a reconciliation between Larsen's South as black women's quicksand and Ellison's South as a place of resource and masculine memory. This chapter also deals with the way remigration is written, and the ways in which remigration (or Ellison's lack of remigration) reveals each author's valuation of the South.

My project investigates the differences between these three narratives and how each utilizes the South as a component of black identity. I consider whether each author concludes that the South has promise for defining black identity, whether it is only an illusion, and whether those options vary for black men and black women as demonstrated in the authors' use of folk symbols and spaces and themes of remigration. It traces the gradual evolution of the South within the black imagination from a place that poses existential danger for African Americans, especially black women, to a place whose memory can be utilized as resource, to a region that offers reconnection with ancestral memory and African roots, enabling rehabilitation and healing.

### **Larsen's South: Pleasant Green or Quicksand?**

In 1923, Jean Toomer published *Cane*, which included “Kabnis,” the story of a return South for an African American man and of the redemption that is found there. In 1928, Nella Larsen published *Quicksand*, which questioned this narrative of the South as resource from a female perspective. The novel is semi-autobiographical, closely corresponding to Nella Larsen’s life as a mixed-race woman who moved between the United States and Denmark, where Larsen’s mother was born. Its story begins and ends in the South, and it traces Helga Crane’s search for a stable identity that fulfills her desires for community and intimacy through a variety of black and European communities. Ultimately, Helga is unable to find identity, even when she tries to find reconnection with a folk memory rooted in the South that she hopes will help her feel unity with a black race from which she feels isolated. Her inability to settle anywhere is tied to her mixed racial identity and the oppression of societies that objectify and stereotype her female body. In the end, *Quicksand* suggests that there is little hope left for black women seeking resolution and fulfillment in the South. The region entraps Helga and disables her mobility, leaving her to sink into a Southern mire of marital embodiment.

*Quicksand* opens on Helga in Naxos, a Southern African-American boarding school in the South. The school is a clear representation of Tuskegee Institute, where Nella Larsen served as assistant superintendent of nurses for a year (Smith 653).

Tuskegee was located in rural Alabama and was the direct manifestation of Booker T. Washington's theories of racial uplift, and when Larsen worked there it "seemed to some progressive educators the very embodiment of contemporary educational theory" (Hutchison 91). However, Larsen, like her character Helga, resented Tuskegee and suddenly left to move to New York. In *Quicksand*, Helga hates the spirit of Naxos, saying that it feels like a "machine" (Larsen 4), a prison (16), and a "cage" (27). The school's oppressive atmosphere is personified by the Southern weather in the first chapter of the novel.

Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp... made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet... It was a comfortable room... flooded with Southern sun in the day, but shadowy just then with the drawn curtains and single shaded light. Large, too. So large that the spot where Helga sat was a small oasis in a desert of darkness. (Larsen 1)

Helga's room is depicted as a refuge from the outside world. Before her setting is identified as Naxos, or even a school, the outside that seeks to invade her sanctum is the Southern sun. This invasiveness is reinforced by several mentions of the oppressive heat, and by the effect that this weather has on her: "the sultry hot Southern spring had left her strangely tired, and a little unnerved" (2). Throughout the novel, springtime marks the beginning of a restlessness within Helga as she grows dissatisfied with her setting. This Southern spring is the first instance, and its heat particularly sets Helga on edge. It causes her to be especially frustrated with Naxos and the paternalism of its white donors. As

these thoughts climax, “a sweet smell of early Southern flowers rushed in on a newly-risen breeze which suddenly parted the thin silk curtains at the opened windows. A slender frail glass vase fell from the sill with a tingling crash” (Larsen 3-4). Here, symbolically, the Southern breeze, usually described as a sweet and refreshing presence, sweeps inside and disturbs the stillness, breaking a femininely fragile glass vessel. The oppressive nature of the South is symbolized, specifically its methods of restricting black women’s sexualities as Helga resolves internally to escape the toxic atmosphere of Naxos.

The oppressive atmosphere of Naxos is symbolized by the Southern weather outside of Helga’s room, but Helga also explicitly identifies Naxos with the South, and she identifies both with white paternalism and a distasteful obsession with the “race problem” that she finds unbearable. As Helga is sitting alone in her room, she contemplates an incident earlier in the day, when “the hundreds of students and teachers had been herded into the sun-baked chapel to listen to the banal, the patronizing, and even the insulting remarks of one of the renowned white preachers of the state” (Larsen 2). This preacher reminds his listeners that they attend “the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country” and counts it evidence against the idea “that the Southerner mistreated the Negro” (3).

And he said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos... there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them... It was their duty to be satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water...

... Long hours after, Helga again felt a surge of hot anger and seething resentment... The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all. (3)

When Booker T. Washington founded Tuskegee, he sought to address a problem that included three groups of people: “the Negroes, whom he hoped to educate and to aid in achieving progress; the Northern white people, whom he depended upon to finance the school; and the Southern white people,” whose permission was necessary and whose approval would demonstrate “better race relations which was his ultimate goal” (Anderson 205). The goal of racial uplift had initially attracted Helga to the college, but she considers that initial passion the “zest of immature people,” and it gradually gave way to “a deep hatred for the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift” (Larsen 5). The smoldering resentment is brought to a flame by the white Alabama preacher, whose paternalism reflects the obsequious attitude of the authorities of Naxos, which was a common criticism of the founding principles of Washington’s Tuskegee, about which W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “Mr. Washington’s programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races” (Du Bois 39). The perceived obsequiousness of Washington and the other authorities at Tuskegee and similar institutions rankled the school’s own faculty and staff. For Larsen herself, their attitude towards women, especially those training to become nurses, and the machine-like feel caused her to resign suddenly in 1916 (Hutchinson 107). In *Quicksand*, Helga feels both trapped and alone within a constricting institution whose philosophy she believes is opposed to her own ideals.

This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency.... It was... a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. (Larsen 4)

Helga, as a mixed-race and transnational woman, cannot conform to the pattern set by her superiors (or by any other community as the novel continues). Helga is further hampered from joining the collective effort by her insufficient bloodlines. Because she cannot prove her "ancestry and connections," she feels she can never truly belong (8). Helga's isolation from Naxos' society is the first example of how her mulatto body and mixed parentage make her an indefinite "other" who does not truly fit into black or white circles.

The question behind this first part of the novel, and each subsequent stage of her journey, is whether or not Helga is a reliable judge of her circumstances. This is fueled by her constant quibbling over the wisdom of her decisions. Her harsh opinion of Naxos is contrasted during her conversation with Dr. Anderson, the school's principal. He attributes her dissatisfaction to her age and inexperience, saying, "Someday you'll learn that lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are part of every ordinary community... I think there's less of these evils here than in most places, but because we're trying to do such a big thing, to aim so high, the ugly things show more" (Larsen 20). He asks her to stay because they need her, but he taints his message when he adds, "Perhaps I can best explain it by the use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and breeding" (21). While Helga is attracted to the idea of playing the evangelist of racial uplift, patient in suffering, she is reminded of her inherited middle-class status by these final words. As



the novel proceeds, she continues to seek out opportunities to minister to those less fortunate members of her race, but she cannot shake the isolation that she feels her origins impose.

Helga works in Chicago, then moves to New York, where she tries to assimilate into the newly forming black bourgeois society, which is personified by Anne Grey, an aptly named character who claims to hate white people and to treasure black culture, but who seeks to adhere to a white standard of beauty and style. She vocally asserts the value even of “the most wretched Negro prostitute... But she turned up her finely carved nose at their lusty churches, their picturesque parades, their naïve clowning on the streets” (Larsen 48). Helga is put off by this snobbish attitude towards black culture, especially aspects of the culture that link it to its rural Southern roots. Her attitude seems representative of what Hazel Carby calls a “moral panic” that was manifesting in urban black communities in response to fears of the promiscuity of African American migrant women from the South (Carby 739-40). Helga enjoys the lifestyle of the dance halls and nightclubs so disliked by Anne and other black social reformers (Carby 745), but she cannot shake an internalized sense of shame in participation. After dancing one night, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. (Larsen 59)

This is not, she thinks, merely a result of her skin color; “it was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (55). Once she leaves Naxos, she finds pleasure in the black nightclubs and entertainment culture that was germinating in New York, and she almost

finds her missing communal connection. She enjoys participating in what she considers to be a primitive sexuality, as indicated by her considering it “the jungle.” This name has important racial connotations, reminiscent of a folk memory of Africa considered to have Southern origins, and Helga is disturbed by the association because she considers herself essentially other. “Larsen seems to imply that African-American intellectuals can realize their repressed sexuality among the folk” (Anismova 177) by using a safe space created by Southern migrants. Helga, however, does not feel like she is essentially able to identify with this folk identity; she is repulsed by the perceived primitivism of the “jungle.” She retains a sense of isolation from her community. Here, she clarifies the source of this sense of isolation as her lack of the intangible identity that would grant her “kin.” Although Helga does not explicitly link kinship to Southern roots, this desire for a community lost in rural-to-urban migration would become a common theme in later migration novels. “In their stories, black migrants emphatically position community as an ideal, expressing it as the need to be embedded in rather than resistant to their new cultural geography” (Rodgers 136). Helga, however, resists this “embedding” out of a repulsion for the folk essence. Helga’s desire for her missing feeling of kinship creates a sense of isolation in New York as it did in Naxos. She again feels a disconnection from the high-brow bourgeois society but discovers a new resonance with some of the rural identity that, at the time, was just beginning to be reconceived by African American artists and intellectuals in an urban context.

Helga decides to leave New York and migrate to Copenhagen, partly because of her disgust with the society she has found, but largely in search of the kinship missing from her life. After failing to feel any ethnic kinship, she seeks it in Europe among her

biological family Critics have often expounded on the relief that Helga finds in Europe from the color line enforced in American society, but this relief is not her only source of comfort in Denmark. She also finds family for the first time in the novel; when she first arrives on the dock and looks apprehensively for a familiar face, she sees her aunt, whose “resemblance to [Helga’s] mother was unmistakable” (Larsen 65) and who says to her, “Little Helga! Little Helga! Goodness! But how you have grown!” (66). The look and sound of family establishes a new sense of kinship and rootedness that has been missing for Helga. Lawrence Rodgers counts this search for community as the central “static, communal, relationship-based imperative of black women’s writing.” He writes,

Women’s communal structures have been characterized by what woman-centered psychologists isolate as a collective vision of social life that challenges male-centered interpretive categories of the self-in-relationships defined by alienation, abstraction, and independence...

Showing minimal interest in exploring the liberating powers of the journey itself... [women writers] have focused instead upon both the difficulties and the benefits associated with replacing one home with another.

(Rodgers 152-53)

The search for improved circumstances and healthier community drove Helga from Naxos to New York and drives her from New York to Copenhagen. She feels a dependence upon community and possesses a self-awareness of her own loneliness that Rodgers posits as distinctive of women’s migration novels. The tragedy of Helga’s story is a continued isolation in each destination that she seeks to make home, an isolation that

comes in Copenhagen, even among her newly discovered kin, as a result of their perceiving her black body as ethnic, folk, and therefore sexually exotic.

In Copenhagen, Helga's body is no longer perceived as abnormal for its mixed-race ancestry for its blackness alone. Her foreignness and the outsiders' gaze make her feel like "a veritable savage," a "queer dark creature," like "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" (Larsen 69-70). Her family's eagerness to exhibit her initiates the separation that grows between them as they are completely unconscious of the discomfort Helga feels at this imposed embodiment.

Here she was, a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed. And she was to be treated like a secluded young miss, a Danish *frøkken*, not to be consulted personally even on matters affecting her personally? She, Helga Crane, who almost all her life had looked after herself, was she now to be looked after by Aunt Katrina and her husband? (71-72)

Helga loathes her lack of independence. The Danes' patronizing attitude links her identity to that of the rural folk and fashions her as primitive and exotic. It is the same primitivism that distinguished the bodies of the dancers in the Harlem nightclub for Helga, and Irina Anisimova argues that "Larsen both exposes the work of primitivism, especially in the Denmark section of the novel and, at the same time, subscribes to certain primitivist presentations of the folk" (176). Just as Helga compared the dancing bodies of Harlem to "the jungle," now the Europeans around her sensualize her body. However, Helga's changing opinion about this objectification reveals that Larsen is not actually endorsing a double standard as Anisimova claims. Helga initially enjoys the flattering attention, and

feels “incited to inflame attention and admiration” (Larsen 74). As she compares Denmark and America, she contrasts the treatment of black bodies.

How stupid she had ever been to have thought that she could marry and perhaps have children in a land where every dark child was handicapped at the start by the shroud of color. She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch. (75)

She considers the attention, even when it is unwanted or patronizing, to be preferable to the violence threatened in America. She enjoys having a kind of agency over the Danes’ perception.

Her pleasure, however, begins to shift as she starts to realize how completely she is being objectified and de-personified. “Not only does she tire of being continuously exhibited, but she finds that she is much more race conscious than she had realized” (Wall 102). She first feels consciously unsettled when she attends a minstrel show featuring two African American singers dancing, “pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease! And how the enchanted spectators clapped and howled and shouted for more!” (Larsen 83). This excessively corporeal exhibition makes Helga feel convicted of putting on a similar show, of exhibiting her body as exotic and thus commodifying it in order to gain approval. She feels ashamed at having revealed “something in her which she had hidden away and hoped to forget” (83) because of the high value placed upon it in Europe. She believes (or hopes) that her hidden essence is

her folk self, her connection with a primitivist element associated with Africa and the South, and she is confused that she had never valued it as highly as the Europeans did. “She suspected that no Negroes, no Americans did. Else why their constant slavish imitation of traits not their own? Why their constant begging to be considered as exact copies of other people? They were all beggars” (83). She is disoriented and unsure what to think, except that she knows she feels a kind of disgust at the display of folk culture (however much it is actually worth) distorted and exhibited for an audience of white consumers. This attitude is confirmed when Axel Olsen proposes to her.

Olsen is an artist who has achieved notoriety by performing the role of the eccentric genius wholly dedicated to his art. In his public pursuit of an artistic lifestyle, he seeks to possess Helga as a kind of avant-garde primitivistic showpiece. After Helga’s refusals of his sexual proposals, he asks her to marry him, saying,

“You know, Helga, you are a contradiction... You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am.” (Larsen 87)

This indecent proposal solidifies Helga’s attitude towards white people as unable to perceive her as like themselves. When she refuses Olsen, she cites racial difference, casting “Olsen’s offer in terms of the African American woman as a possessable commodity, re-emphasizing the position of femininity within certain discourses of race” (Favor 103). She verbalizes her objectification, “But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man” (Larsen 87), as Olsen’s proposal solidifies her sense of her abject nature in her European home. Her unconscious linkage between

sexuality and race implies “an awareness of her legacy of rape and concubinage at the hands of white men” (McDowell xix) as well as a realization that this history of abuse is not consigned to America. “By refusing to give her body to Olsen, she extricates herself from the discourse into which he has literally painted her” (Favor 103). Although she escapes marriage, her refusal leaves her disconnected from her family and unable to feel comfortable in Denmark any longer. She is able to reclaim her self, but it is at the expense of her social standing and connection in Copenhagen.

Verbally confronting Olsen suddenly ends Helga’s enjoyment of her primitive status in Danish society. Her family sympathizes with Olsen, and they think Helga is imagining a prejudice that does not exist, proving that she is “insufficiently civilized. Impulsive. Imprudent. Selfish” (Larsen 91). There is a subtle racism present as they consider her primitive and immature that is distinct in its unpleasantness from the early fetishizing she received. Helga is unable to feel connected any longer, and becomes “homesick, not for America, but for Negroes” (Larsen 92). This is an important distinction. After her earlier stint in New York, she still considers black people exotic and “other,” which “casts doubt on the viability of... a connection. Helga generalizes African Americans as alien... re-presenting in some fashion the type of ‘blackness as otherness’ she experiences in Europe; this time, however, she decides to embrace that categorization” (Favor 104). Her homesickness leads her to think of her African American father (after her white mother’s family has failed to be a resource) as she reaches back genealogically into the past, grasping for identity. She imagines that he must have missed his people’s “inexhaustible humor and... incessant hope... those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments” (92). Ironically, Helga’s

response to the European romanticizing of the primitive Negro spirit is to internalize it and long for it as a fulfillment for missing community and pent-up sexual desire. She herself implicitly makes this stretch, believing that she can only be liberated when among “these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes” (95). “Helga generalizes African Americans as alien, curious others... Helga seeks a discourse of black identity not based on skin color alone but grounded in a cultural and spiritual similarity” (Favor 104-105). She returns to New York seeking a commonality founded on these similarities.

When Helga returns, she initially feels at home (as she did in Copenhagen, Naxos, and New York) among “her people” and is glad that “the distance” has shown her the value of this kinship (Larsen 95). Nevertheless, she does not plan on staying, considering it “too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; something not to be endured for a lifetime if one could escape” (96). For the first time, Helga is aware of her identity as migrant and finds hope in it. Although her rootlessness has often made her unhappy, it has allowed her freedom to search for happiness in new locales or in the very act of migration. Each transplanting allows her to “search for a place where [she] might be able to escape the prejudice [she has] experienced previously and renegotiate [her] racial identity” (Bone 150). Her peace is uneasy, however, as she is haunted by the memory of Dr. Anderson and her regret at not marrying him. “For Helga, Anderson seems to represent creative potential as well as danger, to suggest the possibility that she can reconcile her sexuality with her identity as a black American woman” (Hostetler 43), a sexuality that was originally roused in New York’s night clubs and teased by her exotic (and erotic) performances in Copenhagen. She returns to New York, not planning on staying, but



planning on enjoying time amidst her race, for whom “life was intensely amusing, interesting, absorbing, and enjoyable; singularly lacking in that tone of anxiety which the insecurities of existence seemed to ferment in other peoples” (Larsen 96). Helga’s own primitive stereotypes of black Americans blind her and warp her expectations. On her return to Harlem, she encounters her former fiancé, James Vayle, who tells her that black people always return from Europe because of “something deeper than [money]” (Larsen 101). When Helga protests, saying that she understands because she is a Negro too, he tells her, “You were always a little different, a little dissatisfied, though I don’t pretend to understand you at all” (102). Vayle recognizes the difference in Helga that drives her constant migration, but his response is to try to bind her with a marriage proposal. Helga doesn’t think much about his words and slips away from him. Shortly after, she encounters Robert Anderson, who suddenly kisses her, rousing her sexuality again. She avoids him for a while, until he tells her that he must meet with her. Her preparation highlights her sexual desire, “all night, all day she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror” (Larsen 107). Anderson, however, rejects her, “separat[ing] subjectivity from sexuality and respond[ing] to Helga according to the cultural stereotype of women as objects of desire” (Hostetler 43). His rejection stuns her, leaving her feeling like she has “forfeited [something special] forever” (Larsen 108). She is tormented by her spurned desire, wandering the streets in despair.

Helga happens to wander into a church, one of the storefront congregations founded by migrants as a safe space within unfamiliar urban areas (Griffin 42). Griffin points out that these churches were often created as refuges to “recognize[] and affirm[]

black humanity” but questions whether their safety extends to women (Griffin 9). Indeed, this church offers Helga an easy narrative of repentance and salvation that will grant her access to a folk community, but she does not see the hook within the bait. This Southern black Christianity is the final quicksand that she will not escape. When she enters the church, the people of the congregation immediately conceptualize Helga as a promiscuous woman, and they attempt to save her soul, while revealing an obsession with restricting her sexuality, redirecting it into a sensual spiritual ecstasy, a ritual that weaves together the emptinesses she feels, her romanticizing of black folk culture, her longing for community, and her sexual desire.

At the sight of the bare arms and neck growing out of the clinging red dress, a shudder shook the swaying man at her right. On the face of the dancing woman before her a disapproving frown gathered. She shrieked: “A scarlet ’oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!” (Larsen 112)

Helga’s clothing gives her a place within their religious narrative; she is the adulterous woman who has come to repent. Helga watches their worship with “an indistinct horror of an unknown world” (Larsen 113), and her horror and the scene’s sensuality recall the nightclub in Harlem. She fled the nightclub, but this time, in a weakened state, she eventually yields to their pleas for repentance.

In her shattered state Helga gives in, not to passion, but finally to this construction of herself as scarlet woman, in order to be at “home,” immersed in a sense of belonging that is an utter betrayal of her personality. In Larsen’s view, to succumb to a preexisting paradigm means

to accept one pattern, one stereotype, at the expense of growth or change,  
cutting oneself off from identity as process and dialogue. (Hostetler 43-44)

Helga accepts folk identity as the “pattern” presented in that church in order to escape the rootlessness that has characterized her life thus far. She comes to the front to ask God for mercy, “and to the kneeling girl time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries” (Larsen 114). Through religion, Helga feels an attachment to the primitive spirit that she imagines is an opportunity to finally find the elusive meaning she pursues. She solidifies her newfound connection by marrying Reverend Pleasant Green, whose name invokes a pastoral image associated with the rural South. He is a beckoning opportunity, “a chance at stability, at permanent happiness” (117). He offers her an expression of sexuality that is sanctioned and shameless, since marriage to a preacher is “legitimacy doubled” (McDowell xxi). Marriage also promises escape from the oppressive city, and a solution to the loneliness she has felt throughout her life. She believes it will be “anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses... This one time in her life... she had not clutched a shadow and missed the actuality” (Larsen 118). Helga feels that in Naxos, Chicago, New York, and Copenhagen, she had grasped for identity and missed it, and she believes that finding her folk self in the rural South is her “actuality.” Her hope persuades her to fully commit, binding herself in marriage to Reverend Green, causing her to begin to sink into the Southern sands.

Helga returns South, pursuing this idealized version of community often associated with the South in migration narratives. She loves it at first, thinking, “This time I know I’m right. This time it will last” (Larsen 118). She believes that she has finally found home and finds many different delights. She appreciates the primitive

simplicity of Southern life, accepting “even that bleak air of poverty which, in some curious way, regards itself as virtuous, for no other reason than that it is poor” (119). She tries to practice racial uplift, taking the role of savior for the poor women who she does not think know how to make their homes beautiful. Helga is satisfied at first by the “embodiment” of “the intangible thing for which, indefinitely, always she had craved” (120), the black Southern lifestyle defined by simplicity, religion, and family. Family, especially, gives her a new pleasures of “mingled pride, tenderness, and exaltation” (123) as she begins having Green’s children. It is childbirth, however, that destroys her body and rends the mirage that she conjures for herself. She achieves the kinship that she has sought, but it is this kinship that prevents her escape from the South’s immobilization. Helga’s new identity and community role as the pastor’s wife is a fragile illusion, one that takes energy to maintain. When Helga begins to waste away, her pleasures are revealed as facades.

First, the constant childbearing leaves Helga unable to complete the duties of womanhood. She becomes an insufficient house manager in the eyes of the community, and as she was once legitimized by marrying a preacher, she is now disgraced for not measuring up to her higher calling when she cannot fulfill her role.

For the adoring women of his flock, noting how with increasing frequency their pastor’s house went unswept and undusted, his children unwashed, and his wife untidy, took pleasant pity on him and invited him often to tasty orderly meals, specially prepared for him, in their own clean houses.  
(Larsen 124)

The women's actions reflect the shame of Helga's failure. She asks the other women how they manage and if they are tired all the time. They say, "Ah reckons we's all gwine a be ti'ed till kingdom come.. Jes' make de bes' yuh can," and, "We all gits ouah res' by an' by. In de nex' worl' we's all recompense'. Jes' put yo' trus' in de Sabioah." (125). The other women are able to find strength in faith, but Helga cannot. "She couldn't, she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew that He didn't exist... The white man's God. And His great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe" (130). Without religion, Helga has no resources for strength or recuperation. She realizes that the Southern hierarchy depends on the depletion of female strength through reproductive labor, and the Southern women around her have no source of strength besides a hope for eschatological reckoning. Without a connection to God, Helga loses her commonality with these Southern people. "Helga rejects these folk practices and this community as an acceptable alternative to her past experiences" (Favor 109). Larsen treats female identity as incompatible with black folk experience; it creates dissonance that is only resolvable by means of religion. "There are no redemptive possibilities; there is only a confrontation with the curse of the race" (Griffin 160).

The novel ends in the South. Helga's body ties her there, both by its unending weariness and by her connection to her children. She feels alone again and recognizes the pattern of displacement that has haunted her.

For she had to admit that it wasn't new, this dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In

New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. And it was of the present and therefore seemingly more reasonable. (Larsen 134)

For Helga, and for Larsen, there is no refuge in the South. Folk identity is a mirage that does not nurture female blackness. The lack of refuge is common between this rural community and Helga's previous homes. "Geography, class, race, and gender are inextricably linked factors in creating identity; the tragedy is that the female has to be submerged or relegated to a second-class position to create an identity that finds acceptance in a wide range of communities" (Favor 110). The South, however, is unique among Helga's communities in the way that it binds her body and self, finally immobilizing her. She encounters objectification of her body in New York and Copenhagen, but is the South that tangibly ties that body down through the task of childbirth and through the legal bindings of marriage. Jeffrey Gray argues, "The 'quicksand' finally *is* the body into which her subjectivity is sinking" (268), but it is broader; it is the Southern cultural possession of her body that makes this constantly migratory character stagnate. In Naxos, New York, and Copenhagen, she was offered marriage, and in each she fled the proposal. She is finally baited and trapped by the offering of a folk identity. "In this folk community connected by race, class, and geography, female biology proves the community's most indelible marker. Helga can perform herself in, but she can never leave" (Favor 110). The Southern legacy proves to be as empty a promise as any other location for Helga, but it wields the greatest power over her. Ultimately, it is the only place she cannot flee.

In this early migration narrative, the South drives Helga away, but she also returns to it. Even before black urban populations began migrating back to the South in

significant numbers, this novel reflects the romantic attraction that the South retained as the closest link to African culture and to an authentic American black culture, the folk. Larsen, however, refutes this attraction and portrays the South as particularly dangerous to women. The small Alabama town in which Helga is left is characterized by economic poverty, which creates a desperate society that relies on free female labor and childbirth to survive. Because Helga commits so completely to chasing folk identity, her migration is suddenly and permanently halted. For a mixed-race, upper middle class, transnational woman, her only hope for salvation had been in her potential for mobility, and the significance of her loss of that mobility underscores the dangerous prospects offered by Larsen's South. For Larsen, Helga's mistake is giving up her mobility, which stands in for her development of identity through "process and dialogue" (Hostetler 44), and accepting the paradigm of folk identity. For black women, this identity offers no tenable refuge; the closest Helga comes to a refuge is the urban folk within the Harlem nightclub. "She was blind to its charm, purposely aloof and a little contemptuous" (Larsen 60) because she regards herself as too sophisticated to enjoy "the jungle" unabashedly. This is the only moment in the novel where she enjoys her sexuality without relying on male attention, and she is able to immerse herself in an authentically black experience rooted in the South while adjusted for the North. The nightclub's "ideology of the folk" does not, as Hazel Carby warns, repress "urban imagination and urban histories" (127). Even in New York, however, American society is uniquely repressive towards black women, as seen in Vayle's proposal and Anderson's cold rejection. The novel ends without offering a dependable safe space for black women.

### **Affirming the Unhappy Territory**

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is indisputably a novel of identity. Its unnamed narrator undergoes a journey of self-discovery as he tries to ascertain how to live as a black man in American society. For the unnamed Invisible Man, Southern identity is initially a source of shame that is subsequently rediscovered as a resource. The narrator obtains his college education in the South, but he also receives informal instruction in the coping mechanisms employed by black men to survive the oppression of Jim Crow society. Although Invisible Man is conditioned to feel ashamed of his rural background, he grows to find strength in this folk identity so that he can survive and lead his fellows by relying on a shared ancestral memory. His Southern identity is a crucial component in his ability to lead and live as a black American.

The South is the birthplace and growing place of the novel's narrator. It is here that his journey begins as he starts to wrestle with the inconsistencies of American society's treatment of black people. Ellison wrote that Invisible Man's journey is "from ignorance to enlightenment... He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom" (*Collected Essays* 215). By focusing on this geographic journey, Ellison is invoking the black *bildungsroman*. "In the traditional Black form, the hero... sets out on a journey through the world, obtaining guides who represent different worldviews" (LeSeur 18). At the beginning of the novel, these guides are black Southerners whose strategies for survival have been shaped by the



white South and Jim Crow discrimination. As *Invisible Man* begins to understand the relationship in his own life between action and identity, his formal and informal education is shaped by the words of men he meets who have had to learn to separate their actual selves from their performed selves because they live in the South. This concept of a double life is shocking to the narrator at first, but *Invisible Man* tracks the narrator's realization that this double consciousness is, as Du Bois wrote, necessary for survival in American society. Its necessity is demonstrated in the actions and words of *Invisible Man*'s Southern guides.

The first time the narrator hears about the divide between a man's thoughts and his actions in front of white people is in his grandfather's last words. His grandfather says, "Our life is war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country... I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins" (*IM* 16). *Invisible Man*'s grandfather speaks of a secret war that he has waged alone against his society for his entire life. He verbalizes a strategy of resistance that he claims to have employed under the guise of meekness; "he had called himself a traitor and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity" (*IM* 16). These words terrify the narrator, who afterwards feels that his own meekness has become suspect. "And whenever things went well for me... It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself" (*IM* 16). After learning about the mask that his grandfather wore, the narrator questions whether his own good intentions are genuine or feigned. These words continue to haunt him through the rest of the novel; this is the "discontent [that] jar[s] [him] at an early stage away from the home" that characterizes a *bildungsroman* (Hader). Although he is not ready to join his grandfather's battle, he learns to be suspicious that

black humility may be a subterfuge that undermines white audiences. Invisible Man is still too naive to progress beyond feelings of fright; he cannot yet evaluate his grandfather's success in his mission. He becomes aware, however, that black men may alter their behavior to game the system by which they are surrounded. This is confirmed when the narrator meets Jim Trueblood.

In Chapter 2, the narrator is chauffeuring Mr. Norton, a wealthy Northern donor, through the countryside. Mr. Norton asks to speak to a family he sees, so he and the narrator meet another adept black Southern actor, Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper who has committed incest. Trueblood recounts his story in a manner that he knows will entertain and shock his audience: "He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times" (*IM* 53). His performance as a black "minstrel" figure is calculated to evoke pity and horror from white audiences and accords with their expectations. Tamlyn Avery writes that

Trueblood is a pluralism of identities... [but] his complexity as a character is only acknowledged by the white community after he commits a crime; upon which time he is turned into some sort of indigenous mythological beast, whose obedience and solitude must be paid off. (Avery 10)

Houston Baker argues that Trueblood is not completely passive in this role assignment; he acts as a "creative and commercial man" (Baker 175) through his storytelling in front of white audiences. While his telling of his crime angers and shames the black community, it earns the approval and support of sympathetic or amused white audiences. His performance utilizes a trope with which white Southerners were comfortable; he

relies on a blues lyricism that allows him to embody the “rambunctiously sexual, lyrical, and sin-adoring ‘darky’ [that] is an image dear to the hearts of white America” (Baker 193). Trueblood tells his story “with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame” (*IM* 53) because he knows its power. Trueblood’s performance is enacted to profit from white paternalism, a different goal than Invisible Man’s grandfather, who tried to wage a guerrilla war beneath the guise of humility. Trueblood commodifies the freakish nature of his incestual act by performing the role of sexual deviant that white society expects from black masculinity. His act is a selfish one, although it is understandable as primarily a survival mechanism to avoid punishment for his misdeeds. Invisible Man is ashamed and angry, not only because of the shame that the performance reflects on the race, but also because he recognizes the selfishness in it, saying under his breath, “You no-good bastard! *You* get a hundred-dollar bill!” (*IM* 69). He recognizes the story as a pandering to white expectations without recognizing the pandering in his own.

After the narrator and Mr. Norton leave Trueblood, they travel to the Golden Day, where they meet a veteran, Invisible Man’s third Southern guide, who talks about the consequences of *not* performing humility. During a break from the frenzied, chaotic takeover of the Golden Day by the trustees of the local insane asylum, Mr. Norton and Invisible Man get a chance to speak with a former doctor who served in World War I. He demonstrates his medical expertise by diagnosing a specific ailment from which Mr. Norton suffers. When Mr. Norton expresses surprise that the vet is no longer practicing, the vet explains that he fought in France for a few years, “Long enough to forget some fundamentals which I should never have forgotten” (*IM* 89). He expresses the pain felt by many black veterans who returned from World War I to find their country as

undemocratic as when they left it. He tells the story of men in masks whipping him and destroying his practice for saving lives as a physician because it bestowed dignity on a black man. He points out the narrator's invisibility and Mr. Norton's corresponding blindness:

“Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less -- a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force--” (*IM* 93)

William Lyne writes, “The Golden Day episode begins to show the... limits of signifying... It does not remove the suffering or destroy many institutional and economic barriers” (Lyne 328). Although some people, like Trueblood, were able to operate and improve their circumstances in the Jim Crow South by performing a kind of servile blackness for white onlookers, many were crushed by the discrimination they faced. After fighting in the war, the veteran had forgotten how to perform, the thing that “most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought” (*IM* 89). He, like the grandfather, verbalizes the performative nature of black Southern life, but the veteran demonstrates the consequences of nonconformity. Servility is a skill that is learned and without which it is impossible to survive. The veteran points out the narrator's internalization of white expectations; he calls him “the most perfect achievement of [Mr. Norton's] dreams... he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you” (*IM* 93). The vet is important as a guide because he confronts Invisible Man's blindness as well as his invisibility. He is honest and blunt, characteristics that led to his earlier punishment and which can now

only be categorized by Mr. Norton and the larger society as insanity. For this veteran, insanity and quarantine is preferable to living under what W.E.B. Du Bois called “the veil” (8). As Invisible Man and Mr. Norton listen to the veteran plead his case, they are overwhelmed by what he is saying and retreat as Mr. Norton dismisses what they have heard because “the man is as insane as the rest” (*IM* 94). Norton pathologizes the veteran as insane so that he does not have to deal with the implications of his words. The narrator, following Mr. Norton’s lead, also tries to dismiss the vet. Ellison wrote that men like the narrator “ha[ve] accepted the definition of [themselves] handed down by the white South and the paternalism of northern philanthropy” (*Collected Essays* 344). However, Invisible Man is unable to escape the truth of the veteran’s message. The lesson of Southern black performativity is finally driven home by Dr. Bledsoe, who confronts Invisible Man over his mishandling of Mr. Norton.

Dr. Bledsoe is the final and most dramatic lesson for Invisible Man on what it means for black men to perform in American society. Bledsoe calls the narrator into his office and berates him for taking Mr. Norton out into the countryside. The narrator protests that he was only following Mr. Norton’s instructions, and Bledsoe exclaims, “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South -- did you forget how to lie?” (*IM* 136). The narrator is shocked that he was expected to lie to a white man, but for Dr. Bledsoe, living as a black Southerner necessitates lying to white people. He is as aware and calculating in his performance as Invisible Man’s grandfather, but his subterfuge is calculated to advance his own career. He asks the narrator, “What has happened to you young Negroes? I thought you had caught on to how things are done down here. But you don't even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed

to be. My God... what is the race coming to?" (*IM* 139). Bledsoe believes that, in order for his race to survive and even thrive, they must be shrewd, cunning, and deceitful. He embodies what Ellison later wrote was one of the only ways black men could survive in the South; "they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability becoming... the accomplices of whites in oppressing their brothers" (*Collected Essays* 134). He got to his own position of power by lying to white people and playing the role of the servile black man. "It's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burr-head when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise" (*IM* 140). Here, Bledsoe slips into a rural vernacular that shocks the narrator, who has never heard Bledsoe speak informally. David Goldstein writes, "Black southerners learned to become multilingual, to speak the language their white neighbors wanted to hear" (Goldstein 204). Away from the eyes of powerful white men, however, Bledsoe berates the narrator using the vocabulary of a rural Southerner. "I had to wait and plan and lick around... Yes, I had to act the nigger!" (*IM* 141). His dialect firmly identifies his origin in the poor rural South, revealing his roots to Invisible Man and shaming him by invoking their shared background that both have tried to shun in order to please their white overseers. The veteran's voice, on the other hand, is neither Northern nor Southern:

"Did he *talk* northern or southern?"

"He talked like a white man," I said, "except that his voice sounded southern, like one of ours..." (*IM* 139)

Here, speech is used to judge the merit and background of a man. The veteran spoke authoritatively as a white man would, and his confidence does not configure with

Invisible Man's conception of being black in the South. Hearing the veteran speak is disorienting for Invisible Man, who has internalized the societal pressure to rise above his station through his vocational education at Tuskegee. Part of this ascent means learning to speak "northern" like Dr. Bledsoe without "talking like a white man" and showing disrespect. Dr. Bledsoe links the narrator's rural roots with appearing to be uneducated. White society has deemed black folk identity to be boorish and uncivilized, and Invisible Man has already internalized this judgment. Dr. Bledsoe's switch, however, accidentally reveals the hypocrisy of this dialectical performance. Bledsoe has not overcome his own rural background; he has only learned to hide it. Chastened by Bledsoe's rebuke while not yet explicitly recognizing his hypocrisy as such, Invisible Man resolves to persevere after Bledsoe's example, and he asks Bledsoe for letters of recommendation in order to better himself while away from school. The narrator's ambition helps him cope after Bledsoe expels him from the school, which he perceives as an opportunity to rise through employment in the North. He rationalizes his departure as a delay in his educational journey and a hidden opportunity for redemption. His first step must be to cast off his backwards Southern self and the dangerous lessons the veteran had tried to impart; "the vet was too much a part of an experience which I was already trying to blot out of my consciousness" (*IM* 149).

Invisible Man's departure from his university shares several parallels with Helga's departure from Naxos. Both are propelled from Tuskegee lookalikes into Northern migrations. Helga leaves because of a disgust for white paternalism, which is more fully embodied in *Invisible Man* in Dr. Bledsoe's diatribe and in an earlier sermon praising white benefactors for helping the Founder create the institute (a similar sermon

is also present in *Quicksand*). Invisible Man is not disturbed by this paternalism; he is a more naive character than Helga, who has deeply internalized white expectations and continues to hope to fulfill them after he is dismissed. He also is not threatened with subjugation during his time at the university; his degree will empower him with greater mobility. Helga, on the other hand, is bound to Naxos by financial dependence and by an engagement. She flees partly in order to escape these societal constraints. Both, however, leave the South destitute and move with high hopes to the urban North.

As Invisible Man prepares to transition from the rural South, he is continuing his journey from “ignorance to enlightenment” (*Collected Essays* 215). This transition is a consistent feature of the black *bildungsroman* (LeSeur 76), and the narrator has an idealistic expectation of finding fortune in the North. He begins his journey by trying to distance himself from his Southern roots, accomplished by a symbolic act of “self discipline” in not ordering Southern food while visiting a diner (*IM* 175). He is ashamed of his rural past and believes that it can only hold him back from his ambitions. After a riding beside a white woman on public transport for the first time and seeing black people walk like equals on the sidewalks of New York, the narrator realizes that this is the city of his dreams, without yet realizing that the dream does not match reality:

Sure I had heard of it, but this was real... This really was Harlem, and now all the stories which I had heard of the city-within-a-city leaped alive in my mind. The vet had been right: For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams; perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South. And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly. (*IM* 157)



He resolves to put off his southern self in order to achieve success, following Dr.

Bledsoe's example:

I would be charming... Of course you couldn't speak that way in the South, the white folks wouldn't like it, and the Negroes would say that you were "putting on." But here in the North I would slough off my southern ways of speech. Indeed, I would have one way of speaking in the North and another in the South... If Dr. Bledsoe could do it, so could I. (*IM* 161)

Invisible Man's logic is ironic as he does not perceive himself as "putting on" when he resolves to perform Northern charm before Dr. Bledsoe's business contacts. He begins to deliver the letters of (he believes) recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe to the business contacts, but after a few weeks without success, he becomes worried. Then he hears a blues singer on the street whose words cause him to start "remembering the times that I had heard such singing at home. It seemed that here some memories slipped around my life at campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind" (*IM* 170).

The blues singer, Peter Wheatstraw, reminds the narrator of both the vets from the Golden Day and a country preacher (*IM* 170-171). The singer is a speaker of the pain felt in the inability to live authentically. He uses the blues, a form of expression born in the black South that Ellison describes as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it... by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (*Collected Essays* 129). As the narrator is trying to distance himself from his Southern past, it is a Southern voice that best expresses the pain that he is feeling. "I wanted to leave him, and yet I found a certain comfort in walking along beside him" (*IM* 171). Leon Forrest writes

that “there is synthesis possible for the hero if he but trusts his underground peasant intelligence and memory” (Forrest 65). Healing, or at least survival, is possible when Invisible Man does not deny the “peasant,” or Southern/rural identity he has buried within himself. Peter Wheatstraw accuses Invisible Man of trying to deny him (identifying the narrator with the biblical Peter), and Wheatstraw asks him if he is a Southern boy. The narrator says “Yes,” (*IM* 173). When Wheatstraw leaves, he thinks, “God damn... they’re a hell of a people! And I didn’t know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me” (*IM* 174), still referring to Southern people in the third person. The narrator does not hold onto the moment long; he is embarrassed when the counterman in a coffee shop guesses that he is Southern, so he orders Northern food that he does not want as an “act of discipline” (*IM* 175). He seeks to distance himself from his Southern roots. However, after his rejection by Mr. Emerson, he quickly returns to the blues to soothe his aching spirit, remembering a tune that repeats the line “O Well, they picked poor Robin clean” (*IM* 190) over and over. “The song mocks and thereby instructs him that each person must constantly die, or shed the skin of his innocence, in order to grow” (Forrest 64). Although the narrator does not take public pride in his rural background, in his moment of crisis, he turns inwards again to his Southern self and memory to heal and recover. Helga also discovers a folk undercurrent in New York, but her discovery takes place in a nightclub. She discovers a sexuality that she considers primitive and exotic, what she calls “the jungle.” Her Southern discovery is primarily linked to sexuality, an inner force that is powerfully compelling but shameful for its primal connotations. Like Invisible Man, she is separated from full enjoyment by her

shame, a shame enforced by the stigma that urban society held towards rural Southern migrants.

As Invisible Man is beginning to find value in his Southern identity, he is nearly killed in the explosion at Liberty Paints, and he experiences a symbolic rebirth in the company hospital and in the arms of Mary Rambo. After the explosion, the narrator wakes up inside a mechanical womb unable to remember his name or any part of his identity. As his mind starts to wander, distant nonsensical memories of the South float through his consciousness - “Oh, doctor... did you ever wade in a brook before breakfast? Ever chew sugar cane?” – and he recalls a chain gang and one of his grandmother’s lullabies (*IM* 229). These sensory memories from his rural childhood are the only sense of self that he is able to recall, highlighting their importance within the narrator’s consciousness; they are too essential for white men to uproot. When the doctors ask him about his name and family, he cannot remember them, but their references to Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit bring back memories of childhood. These pieces of black Southern folklore are the only memories core enough to survive the explosion. George Kent writes, “[In this] highly symbolic section which portrays the tendency of industrialism to reduce men to a programmed zero, the Brer Rabbit motif emphasizes the toughness of the Black experience, the indestructibility of a fiber” (Kent 55). When the narrator is asked, ‘Who was Buckeye the Rabbit?’ he is “giddy with the delight of self-discovery and the desire to hide it. Somehow *I* was Buckeye the rabbit... or had been” (*IM* 236). Incapable of remembering his name and background, he is able to find identity in the childhood folk story of the rabbit who outwits his hunters. In his Southern background Invisible Man is able to find solace and hope for escape in an

inherited legacy of wit that enables the prey to evade its captors. Once he does escape, it takes another Southern presence to bring him back to health.

After the narrator's release, he is taken in by Mary Rambo, who nurses him without compensation. Shanna Greene Benjamin calls her a "folk presence" because she embodies the near-stereotypical black Southern mother. Claudia Tate adds that "she is not bound by the ['mammy'] stereotype. She is the nurturer of a *black* child, not the master's white child" (Tate 261). Her character's complexities may be missing, but Ellison has pared her down to her important role: nurturing the narrator and infusing him with a sense of purpose and identity. This Southern mother figure speaks best how Invisible Man's Southern identity makes him an ideal leader:

"Y'all's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something's else, it's the one's from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgets. They find a place for themselves and forgits the ones on the bottom." (*IM* 249)

Invisible Man is set apart because he is from the South, where discrimination and segregation are more painful than the North. He is especially equipped to lead because of the informal education he received from his grandfather, Trueblood, the veteran, and Dr. Bledsoe in the methods, meanings, and consequences of negotiating the white gaze. He can be a leader for his race because he cannot forget the pain of living as a black man. Mary's words are extremely significant for Invisible Man's new understanding of his identity as a Southerner. She is mother and midwife for his rebirth:

Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership... I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive... The obsession with my identity... returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? (*IM* 253)

Invisible Man finds the answer to this question of identity and internalizes Mary's words when he smells "the odor of baking yams..., bringing a stab of swift nostalgia" (*IM* 256). He buys one, smears it with butter, and enjoys it on the street. Where Nella Larsen uses the nightclub and storefront church to evoke Southern space, Ellison uses food as a proxy for the black Southern identity reimagined by settling migrants. As black men and women were migrating from the South and establishing new communities in urban contexts, food began to play an essential role in invoking commonalities. Because of "economic hardship, personal pride, and the concept of commensality[,] food came to represent the resilience of the African American people in the South" (Poe 12). It was a shared custom developed under slavery with origins dating back to early African memories. When Invisible Man relishes the yam on the sidewalk, he is identifying proudly as a black migrant despite the possible stigma surrounding that identity (Poe 8-10). He relishes not only the rich sweetness of the yam (suggestively, a *root* vegetable) but the freedom to enjoy it as his authentic self. He looks back with contempt on the man he was, who turned down Southern food to perform like Dr. Bledsoe. "What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked" (*IM* 258). It is his first full rejection of wearing a mask to satisfy societal standards, and it is the first time he uses the "we" pronoun when

referring to rural black Southerners. He fantasizes of confronting Bledsoe over his closet Southern tastes:

“Bledsoe, you’re a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels!...” Why, with others present, it would be worse than if I had accused him of raping an old woman... He’d lose caste. The weekly newspaper would [say] *Prominent Educator Reverts to Field-Niggerism!* (IM 259)

He is exultant in his newfound authenticity. He is not only proud to love what he loves, he is proud that those things are Southern. He brags about his yam eating capacity to the seller, saying:

“They’re my birthmark... I yam what I am!”

“Then you must be from South Car’lina,” he said with a grin.

“South Carolina nothing, where I come from we really go for yams.” (IM 260)

He has transformed from being ashamed of his preferred foods because they might mark him as Southern to correcting this salesman and claiming not only the South but the Deep South. Despite the painful memories and lessons he has learned about the trauma of growing up there, he learns to be proud of being Southern. Ralph Ellison said:

We make so many assumptions. We assume that Negroes are not going to love the South. I suppose it is hard to contemplate an elasticity which allows us to survive these total efforts at brutalization during various periods and still to affirm the seasons, the landscape, the birds, and so on. This is the human reaction. I do not believe that we begin to understand

Negroes or white Southerners until we take this into consideration.

(*Daedelus*)

Ellison expresses the affection that Invisible Man learns to feel for the simple, good things that Southern culture provided. This black Southern identity is rooted for the narrator in living honestly.

After discovering this joy in living unselfconsciously, Invisible Man immediately gets the opportunity to be the leader that Mary predicted he would become. He sees an eviction happening and tries to ignore it, but he is moved to pity when their belongings remind him of their shared ancestral home. “In an epiphany, Invisible Man sees the ancestral past littered on the street” (Callahan 66). The past, embodied by these items, is discounted and literally discarded as Invisible Man had attempted to do with his own heritage. The narrator begins “talking rapidly without thought but out of my clashing emotions” (*IM* 269). He is chasing the “thread of reality” about which Thomas Schaub writes, and although he misjudges the momentum of the crowd at first, he is emotionally attuned to his audience and follows its energy and action even when it contradicts his words (Callahan 67-68). His speech draws the interest of Brother Jack, the leader of the Party, who tells him, “You try to sound cynical, but I see through you... You were enormously moved. Your emotions were touched” (*IM* 283). Invisible Man’s words were powerful because he meant them, and because he understood his audience and was emotionally connected to them; he says, “I like them, they reminded me of folks I know down South” (*IM* 285). He shares an ancestral home with this couple. They are linked, even as they are all strangers to this urban environment, by a communal memory of Southern oppression. His oratory invokes this connection by employing a call and

response, using a sermon form that expressed the angst and anguish of a “dispossessed people” in the face of oppression (Callahan 109). It also evokes the oratory used by black preachers when giving a sermon and performs the role of community leader central to rural Southern communities. “The preacher-poet-performer as creator of social values must tap into [the] embedded linguistic code and its attendant responsive mythology if he is to be successful as he *structures* the meaning of blackness” (Hubbard 9-10). Invisible Man successfully utilizes his newly claimed ancestral memory to perform and present before his audience of ordinary African Americans. It is a powerful performance because it initially evolved as a site of resistance against white slaveowners. Brother Jack does not grasp the significance of this connection or its essential threat to white authorities. He “recruits Invisible Man for the Brotherhood organization because he has use for the young man’s vagrant, unfocused, uncontextualized capacity for eloquence” (Callahan 68). The narrator has only just discovered this sense of fulfillment when Jack steps in to explain it and harness it for his own means. This intervention distracts the narrator from distilling what change brought him joy and empowered him to move his audience.

Before Invisible Man can process the emotional change that has occurred, Brother Jack steps in to tell him that he is wrong:

“Oh, no, brother; you’re mistaken and you’re sentimental. You’re not like them. Perhaps you were, but you’re not any longer. Otherwise you’d never have made that speech... You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it’s dead...” (*IM* 285)

Jack is able to harness the narrator at a moment when the narrator is desperate for money and believes that they share the same goals. He hopes that he can work within the



Brotherhood to help his race while achieving significance and personal success by working within history. The narrator wants to be remembered, and Jack promises to help him become the next Booker T. Washington if he will join the Brotherhood's vision of realism, materialism, and scientific thinking. Invisible Man does not draw a connection between Jack's patronage and the patronage of the white Northern philanthopists' at the Southern university. There is no room in Jack's philosophy for Invisible Man's authentic expression inherited from the South; "Our discipline demands therefore that we talk to no one... So you must put aside your past" (*IM* 301). However, when the narrator gives his first speech for the Brotherhood, eventually "he exhausts the political theme... [and] emptied of the familiar, he must improvise... Oratory yields to storytelling" (Callahan 70). As he shifts from cold politics to a confessional tone, he tells the audience, "I feel suddenly that I have become *more human!*" (*IM* 337). His speech effectively moves his audience, but it frightens the Brotherhood because they know that it is out of their control. They decide to rein in the narrator's oratory through training, and their tone has a thinly veiled racism as they talk about "taming" their "wild" speaker (*IM* 343). The narrator's Southern oratory is powerful, but it is also threatening because it lacks the marks of white civilization. Like Helga's nightclub, the narrator's speech is too close to the "jungle." The committee's paternalism has racial undertones, especially when Brother Wrestrum accuses the narrator of trying to glorify himself. The narrator writes, "Wrestrum had snatched me back to the South... and I felt naked" (*IM* 393). Wrestrum's false accusation, accepted by the committee, invokes memory of the Southern racial nature of truth. Looking back on his moment of anger at the false accusation, the narrator says, "For a moment I had almost allowed an old, southern backwardness which I had

thought dead to wreck my career” (*IM* 398). He does not register the misunderstanding as racist, but considers his own angry reaction an unwelcome remnant of the “southern backwardness” that he learned from the vet and his grandfather. In the Brotherhood, the narrator loses his positive associations with his Southern identity, and he is convinced that his desire to speak candidly is a primitive urge that he must fight through discipline. The Brotherhood seeks to harness the energy and anger of the black people of Harlem, but its members do not understand the uniqueness of the hardships felt by African Americans. They cannot hear the blues rhythm of Invisible Man’s oratory. Invisible Man is swayed to their cause out of fear of insignificance; he watches other black men on the street and thinks, “If they spoke back... What would they say? For the boys speak a jived-up transitional language full of country glamour... They were men out of time-- unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would be gone and forgotten” (*IM* 431). He considers the Brotherhood, an organization run by white leadership, to be his only opportunity for a transcendent legacy. Invisible Man’s internal conflict over the best mode of speaking climaxes in his speech at the funeral for Tod Clifton.

Tod Clifton was a handsome young man who had helped Invisible Man organize black migrants for the Brotherhood. He disappeared suddenly, abandoning the Brotherhood without explanation, until Invisible Man sees him selling racist dolls on a street corner. As Invisible Man tries to confront him, Clifton is shot by a police officer for knocking off his hat. Invisible Man is tasked with speaking at Clifton’s funeral. As the narrator stands before the large crowds and tries to summon words to express his feelings, he hears a man singing “Many a Thousand Gone,” a Southern spiritual composed by slaves, and he “suddenly understands that for these people love intensifies

the engagement with the world that becomes inevitably political. To [these people] Tod Clifton... has become one of the many thousands gone, the victims of racial violence” (Callahan 76). This allows the narrator to tap into the feeling that carries the crowd and improvise based on their emotion. His performance has a jazz, blues rhythm that is rooted in their shared Southern homeland and that unites their feelings powerfully. Finally, the narrator sees the people as “not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women” (*IM* 448). They are no longer a resource but possessors of a common heritage. He speaks their language; Leon Forrest, writing about the blues language of the novel, says that “in the case of the black man the genesis of language has an ancestral root in the old country of the Southland” (Forrest 66). Invisible Man taps into this root to connect with the crowd. As he is leaving, Invisible Man writes that he is “walking a southern walk in southern weather.” He sees the crowds’ shined shoes, and remembers “Even down South they’d always shined their shoes” (*IM* 449). He is fully tapped back into his Southern identity, and this time he maintains it even in the face of the Brotherhood.

The leadership committee does not understand the symbolic significance of Clifton’s death for the black community. They remember Clifton as a deserter of the cause and accuse Invisible Man of honoring a traitor’s death. Brother Jack accuses the narrator of “riding ‘race’ again” (*IM* 458). Invisible Man holds his ground, until Brother Jack shows Invisible Man his glass eye to demonstrate what must be sacrificed for progress. This symbolic action reveals the Brotherhood’s blindness. Later, as the narrator is walking through Harlem, he is conflicted by the knowledge that “outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn’t see us” (*IM* 488). “Only in the Brotherhood had there seemed a chance... a mere glimmer of light, but behind

the... facade of Jack's eye I'd found an amorphous form" (*IM* 496). The narrator realizes that he cannot ever equally participate in the Brotherhood because they will never treat him as a brother. He vows to live as a traitor and spy in the organization's midst as his grandfather called him to do, but he believes that the Brotherhood uses even this to incite a riot in Harlem for its own agenda. He attempts to purposefully enact the deception of double consciousness that his grandfather and Dr. Bledsoe employed and taught him. He seeks to undermine the white men of the Brotherhood, but he is outmaneuvered. Unsure how to respond, Invisible Man takes up hibernation beneath the streets and contemplates what is left to him.

Beneath the city streets, Invisible Man burns the remnants of his previous identities to briefly light up his room. Each item, his high-school diploma, Clifton's doll, the anonymous letter, and the slip of paper with his Brotherhood name, symbolize the power that white naming has had over him. His existence and identity have been regulated by white men his entire life; they "named me and set me running with one and the same stroke of the pen" (*IM* 555). In this "dimensionless room," he enters a Trueblood-esque dream state characterized by helplessness, and he dreams that the white authorities of his life castrate him to remove his illusions. Afterwards, he realizes that invisibility has characterized his life, and that he can no longer return to the life he had. In the final chapter of the novel, his discouragement begins to change.

My mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather... I'm still plagued by his deathbed advice... Did he mean say 'yes' because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? (*IM* 561)

He wonders whether his grandfather's call was to usurp the white men in control or whether it was "deeper," whether it was an action "to affirm the principle on which the country was built" (*IM* 561). He realizes Southern white men's death and destruction are his own because "weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (*IM* 562). He begins to identify with a body of people, an American body, which leaves him without an opponent to resist. Here, he thinks of the South again:

Since then I've sometimes been overcome with a passion to return into that 'heart of darkness' across the Mason-Dixon line, but then I remind myself that the true darkness lies within my own mind, and the idea loses itself in the gloom. Still the passion persists. Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me. (*IM* 566)

The narrator's only remigration is to the darkness within his own mind, but he considers it a kind of remigration because his memory and identity are rooted in the South. In his final resolution, before he resolves to return to the surface, Invisible Man takes ownership of his Southern identity, even as it links him to white as well as black Southern people. Invisible Man's identity is connected to the folk like Helga's, but his extends beyond to both the black people and the white oppressors of the South, and of all American society. "He strives to liberate himself from other people's definition of reality (history)... distinguish[ing] the unnamed narrator from his grandfather" (Hubbard 65). In a radical shift, the narrator unites his grandfather's history of oppression to the American principle of equality in an "approach... through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (*IM* 567). This chaotic vision defies binaries of reaction and paints possibility

for a black leader in America. Embracing his vocation as orator, he emerges, ready to use his invisibility and Southern memory as a resource.

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were,  
what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really  
happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which  
frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

(*IM* 568)

For Ellison, experience of oppression can be verbalized, and those words have power. No man is separated by identity, and because of humankind's common subjectivity, every experience has potential to speak to anyone.

Obviously, this is nearly the exact opposite of Helga Crane's experience. For her, Southern identity as characterized by the rural folk is a mirage. Gender is an important cause of difference in the two novels. Both characters are extremely mobile, and both novels are narratives that follow them from community to community. Both fail in each instance to find a successful home. However, Helga's mobility is ultimately cut off, while *Invisible Man* ends in the narrator's emergence from his underground lair. For Ellison's narrator, escape was always possible from the South, and his mobility remained largely unhampered. He is only trapped once, in the Liberty Paints laboratory. Even there, he escapes and is nurtured back to health by Mary Rambo, the embodied folk presence. In fact, in earlier drafts, Mary Rambo actually rescues him from his imprisonment (Green 124). For Helga, the South does the opposite and ties her down by binding her female body. The South as quicksand is also a reflection of the early period of migration novels,

represented for Farah Jasmine Griffin by Richard Wright. “For Wright, the South is never a site of possibility for the migrant. Unless he... distances himself from folk culture, he is assured a certain literal or metaphorical ‘death on the city pavements’” (Griffin 10).

Ellison helped introduce the idea of “the possibilities of the South by privileging the importance of certain elements of black Southern culture to the survival of urban blacks” (Griffin 11). Because Ellison’s narrator does not romanticize or covet Southern identity, he does not feel an irresistible pull home. Helga returns to find sexual fulfillment and community, but Ellison’s narrator’s goals are less personal. He is driven by a vision for America’s future, but his vision reflects the ways in which he is more initially satisfied than Helga Crane. Invisible Man is, at times, able to fulfill his needs for community and companionship, which leaves him to pursue self-actualization. Helga, on the other hand, searches for a more basic fulfillment from the South, driving her remigration. For Ellison’s Invisible Man, the South is a resource, not only for survival, but for transcendent leadership. He has more opportunity to lead in the North, so he is not compelled to return South.

Ellison’s narrator reflects the complicated sentiments felt by many black writers. Larry Conley, a journalist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, wrote, “The truth is, I don’t really know why I returned. The reasons, confusing and contradictory, are all wrapped up in that mixture of hope and despair I often feel for the South” (Cobb 264). The South has hurt and educated Invisible Man, and it is inseparable from his self. The narrator’s grandfather, Jim Trueblood, the veteran, Dr. Bledsoe, all express the trauma of living in a society that forces them to perform the roles expected and commands absolute respect. The South has stripped each of his dignity and of much of his happiness. However,

Ellison believed that through this harsh, unfair discipline, certain invaluable traits were gleaned:

the faith, the patience, the humor, the sense of timing, the rugged sense of life and the manner of expressing it which all go to define the American Negro... These possessions must endure forever... because they represent a further instance of man's triumph over chaos. You know, the skins of those thin-legged little girls who faced the mob in Little Rock marked them as Negro, but the spirit which directed their feet is the old universal urge toward freedom. For better or worse, whatever this is of value in Negro life is an American heritage. (*Collected Essays* 79-80)

Ellison depicts the South as a place of unspeakable evil that desperately requires change, but also as a place that has given him and his people an identity through which they are equipped to lead, not only their own race, but the entire American people.



### **Buried Treasure: Discovering Southern Roots**

Most African American migration novels confront the conflict between expectations of success and the reality of persistent racism as their characters move from the South to a Northern urban center. However, as these communities of dissatisfied expats settled together, they began to build a new culture on the foundation of the home they all shared. Toni Morrison's novels are a celebration and examination of these communities. *Song of Solomon*, her third novel, was published in 1977, at a time when many black Southerners and descendants of black Southern migrants were beginning to feel renewed warmth towards the South and patterns of Northern migration were even beginning to reverse into remigration (Cobb 262-63). The South was beginning to be seen as an ancestral home and the closest link for African Americans to Africa. "John Oliver Killens argued that 'the people of the black South are much closer [than Northern African Americans] to their African roots, in its culture, its humanity, the beat and rhythms of its music, its concept of family, its dance, and its spirituality'" (Cobb 279). Morrison, although born in Ohio, is steeped in this tradition and her novel celebrates the South for its place in African American spiritual ancestry. "She says that her storytelling, like that of the characters... is an attempt to preserve and pass on the stories and the songs of the African American past" (Griffin 6). *Song of Solomon* is an inversion of the typical black migration narrative (especially as seen in *Invisible Man*) that exhibits the potential for healing in that past. It tells the story of the Dead family, who have been stranded in an

urban landscape, cut off from their community by their middle-class status. Milkman discovers the root of their family trauma in the South, but he also utilizes Southern memory to find healing. In the novel, the South is the root, or at least the purest distillation, of the racist oppression of the period, but it also offers the best resource for overcoming affliction as the “repository of the ancestor” (Griffin 6).

Morrison’s remigration novel begins with the Dead family in Ohio already dealing with the trauma inflicted by their northern migration. The novel opens with a scene that introduces the trauma inflicted on black communities by white society; this scene also introduces the motif of flying as a response to black masculine impotence enforced by white society. The first image is the painfully ordinary insurance agent, Mr Smith, stepping out onto the roof of the charity hospital on Not Doctor Street and getting ready to fly. The naming process of the street is an immediate example of the conflict between the newly founded migrant communities and white governing bodies. The city legislators do not consider the communal name “appropriate,” and they make sure that letters addressed to the street are consigned to the Dead Letter Office. Naming is a symbol for white society’s power over black lives, recognizable in *Invisible Man*, when the narrator is constantly named by the various white men under whose authority he lives. His final rejection of their naming is an act of resistance, and his lack of name in the novel illustrates the significance of that act. Similarly, naming becomes an avenue of resistance in *Song of Solomon* as black men list the street as their address when they are drafted. As pressure intensifies, the community begins to call it Not Doctor Street as “a way to keep their memories alive” (Morrison 4). This small act of naming as resistance is introduced in the epigraph (“And the children may know their names” [Morrison n.p.]

and demonstrates the communal bonds that connected African Americans in the industrial North.

However, small acts of resistance do not mean that white society is not prevailing. One of the casualties of this conflict was black masculinity, which is symbolized in Mr Smith's attempt to fly. Mr Smith is "heavily associated with illness and death" and the pain of everyday life, and "jumping from Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done" (Morrison 8-9). His failure to survive foreshadows the difficulties that black men face and that pressure them to attempt escape from the mundanity of their circumstances and their own inability to overcome oppression and protect their people. An old woman sings a folk song about "Sugarman" who "done fly away... home" (Morrison 6), signifying the ancestral memory of men who used to fly. This memory has dark connotation; Terri Snyder links the legends of "flying Africans" to slave suicides, committed to escaping the dehumanizing effects of slavery while retaining some agency. The oppression of Northern cities is associated with the brutality of slavery by Mr Smith's flight/suicide. When Mr Smith falls, it is a failure of black masculine strength as he is unable to reclaim the power of his ancestors. For Milkman, "Mr Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four... that only birds and airplanes could fly, he lost all interest in himself" (Morrison 9). "This opening vignette establishes the conflict between the greater culture and the black community. The unfolding story indicates that the roots of this conflict derive from previous generations and layers of discrimination, familial dysfunction, and abuse" (Schreiber 95). There is resistance here in the act of naming and singing folk memory,

traditions from a Southern past that serve to link the community, but it is not enough on its own to empower black men to fly.

Mr Smith's plunge occurs as Milkman is being born, and it is a formative moment in how he thinks of himself as a black man robbed of strength. He is born into a family isolated from the surrounding community and its potential healing resources by Macon Dead's wealth and accompanying snobbery. Macon seeks to build his family into a recreation of the white upper middle class at the apex of the American Dream. Every Sunday, he takes his family on a ride in their Packard as a ritual "to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man" (Morrison 31). Macon's isolation from his community is seen in the onlookers' reaction to this exhibition:

[They] watched the family gliding by with a tiny bit of jealousy and a whole lot of amusement, for Macon's wide green Packard belied what they thought a car was for... He hailed no one and no one hailed him. There was never a sudden braking and backing up to shout or laugh with a friend... What's more, they doubted that he had ever taken a woman into the back seat... The Packard had no real lived life at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse. (Morrison 32-33)

Other black people do not feel the envy that Macon hopes to inspire because they recognize the loneliness that actually underlies Macon's life. The Deads do not live in full communion with the people around them, which prevents Milkman from forming a sense of identity as a black man at an early age. "The degeneration of the Dead family, and the destructiveness of Macon [Jr]'s rugged individualism, symbolize the invalidity of American, indeed Western values. Morrison's depiction demonstrates the incompatibility

of received assumptions and the texture and demands of life in black American communities” (Smith 34). Macon seeks to emulate a white image of success, and it prevents his family from fully participating in their community. There is a rottenness in Macon that was borne out of racial violence, specifically the lynching of his father, and it drives him to perpetuate emotional violence against his family while isolating himself from other African Americans because of their poverty. That isolation is painful for his children and is what drives Milkman’s quest for identity as a means of escaping it.

An important male role model for Milkman is Guitar, another black man who, like Macon, has been shaped by the racial trauma he has experienced. Guitar is deeply connected to the community, but he shares some of the scars that affect Macon. Guitar grew up in the South, so he serves as a guide with a closer link to their shared ancestral home. It is he who explains the South’s abuse that has continued in the North, and how it “makes us do funny things. Things we can’t help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don’t even know why” (Morrison 87). Here, Guitar explains his own quest for black retribution, a quest fueled by the confusion inflicted by his Southern past and the helplessness inflicted upon him. His erratic and unpredictable actions are part of the trauma inflicted upon black men by the threat to their families and lives from which they are unable to provide protection. The vulnerability of black life also creates an instability in the lives of children that Guitar later recounts as the pain of being left:

Everything I ever loved in my life left me. My father died when I was four. That was the first leaving I knew and the hardest. Then my mother. There were four of us and she just couldn’t cut it when my father died. She

ran away. Just ran away... So it was hard for me to latch on to a woman.

Because I thought if I loved anything it would die. (Morrison 307)

Guitar's inability to "latch on" is an example of the trauma inherited and transmitted in turn by families living under white supremacy. "Deserting the family in a time of grief, Guitar's mother increases the family's stress by disrupting a secure attachment for her children, and the movement from caretaker to caretaker compounds Guitar's trauma of loss" (Schreiber 96-97). It is this traumatized, angry young man who teaches Milkman much of the toxic masculinity that shapes his relationships with his family and Hagar. Guitar tries to teach Milkman the importance of taking care of women by comparing hurting a woman to the sin of killing a doe, but later says that the reason the black woman should be protected is "because she's *mine*" (Morrison 223). Guitar is defensive of white men's intrusion on what he considers to belong to black men, and he is suspicious of black women, who "want your whole self" (Morrison 222). "In Guitar's view, the African-American man is the supreme marginal figure, silenced not only by whites, but undermined and unmanned even by African-American women" (Duvall 121). Guitar's masculinity is defined by combat and one's ability to maintain honor in the face of abuse, and his lessons of manhood teach Milkman to inflict similar abuses on the women in his own life.

Milkman's quest begins with an emerging understanding of the historic abuse inflicted on black people that is rooted in ancestral memories of the South. When Milkman walks into the barbershop, a space where black male fellowship is found, he observes the men talking about Emmett Till's death and seeking to make meaning from it. They trade "tales of atrocities... A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger

turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed... [about] the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness” (Morrison 82). This memory of their shared Southern past has defined these men’s identities. They understand themselves as men who have escaped but who have had to compromise their masculinity by retreating in order to survive. They laugh at themselves to retrieve some sense of agency by acknowledging the comedy of their performance without its humiliation. This communal circle is what Marilyn Mobley calls the “signifying voice.” “The importance of this voice is not only that it reveals the play of multiple voices in dialogue with one another within the African American community but that it reveals Milkman’s alienation from his own voice and his inability to hear his connection to the language of others” (Mobley 55). Milkman has been shielded thus far from white oppression and so has not been initiated into his black manhood. His immaturity prevents him from joining the communal “signifying voice.” While Milkman has felt his own impotence, he has not learned to trace its causes yet because he has existed outside of a community that has sought to find meaning and understanding together. After Milkman and Guitar leave the barbershop, Guitar tries to bring Milkman up to speed, telling him that “The cards are stacked against us... making us do funny things... Try to understand it, but if you can’t just forget it and keep yourself strong, man” (Morrison 87-88). Guitar seeks to initiate Milkman into a feeling of masculinity defined in resistance to the powers that would kill him like Till. Milkman responds with sorrow and shame at the defeat of black people (“Why can’t we get our stuff the right way?” [Morrison 88]) and with contempt for his grandfather, who took the name given to him by a white man “like a fuckin sheep” (Morrison 89). Most importantly, he resolves to

ask Pilate about his own name. Milkman is beginning to understand that he must unearth his identity, or “know” his name, in order to finally grow up, and he turns to the past possessed by Pilate to find this identity.

Pilate is Milkman’s link to his ancestry. She is a source of folk wisdom and oral tradition within the community that is symbolized in her vocation as producer of the local moonshine. She retains the Southern recipe for a drink reminiscent of the folk, and she distributes it through the community without regard for class or social status. She exists as the antithesis to Macon, without electricity, gas, or running water, “as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road” (Morrison 27). She and her female family live moment to moment, eating without silverware and living without money. Her female family is a non-normative family structure that is designed to shield her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar from male threats. It enables Pilate, the repository of folk memory rooted in the South, to avoid the male threat that has also descended from their Southern past. Pilate forms a female alliance that creates a space drastically different from anything within Helga Crane’s Southern community. Helga seeks help from other women, but she is rejected because of her poor performance as a wife and is told to look to God for help. Pilate’s home shows the possibility of protection offered by a radical female alliance, but even her home is eventually brought down by male desire. When Milkman enters her house, she makes him feel proud to be a Dead for the first time; he feels “defensive” and “possessive” (Morrison 38) of the name and its legacy. Pilate provides him with some family history that he has never heard; she tells him how Macon Jr cared for her when they were orphaned and that they formerly owned a farm in Pennsylvania. The encounter begins to fill in Milkman’s sense of self that he



had missed without having access to a culture or a family legacy of which he could be proud. This oral family history “acknowledges the debt that any black writer has to the oral tradition, the true legacy of black people” (Fabre 108). Significantly, as Milkman’s link to his ancestry, Pilate does not pass down her memories through written text but through oral storytelling that is an important part of that legacy. Her storytelling occurs while she cooks for Milkman, and the two acts harmonize as Pilate assumes the role of “cook/storyteller/griot... Milkman will continue for longer than she lives to absorb refreshment from [her]... If he gets his masculine stuff from Guitar, he pilfers from Pilate the skill to incorporate feminine into masculine” (Mayberry 108). The role of the mother or surrogate mother as the protector of cultural continuity is traced by Hortense Spillers;

The black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself... It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood -- the power of "yes" to the "female" within. (80)

Pilate plays a role created by the the institution of slavery in passing on her folk heritage to Milkman in a way that places him in touch with his “‘female’ within,” a lesson that Guitar never had the chance to receive. She nuances the lessons of Southern trauma that Milkman is receiving from Guitar and Macon, reminding him through her therapeutic presence that their Southern culture is also a resource, as well as the root of inherited trauma. Through memory and culture, Pilate is restoring Milkman’s sense of black identity.

The story of Macon Sr is confirmed and expanded by Milkman's father. Macon remembers his Southern childhood with fondness and as a time when he learned to be a man from his father. "I worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him. From the time I was four or five we worked together" (Morrison 51). He is proud for his father who took "sixteen years to get that farm to where it was paying" (Morrison 53) and built a life for Macon Jr and Pilate on it, but this memory is made bittersweet by the trauma inflicted by their white neighbors. They murder Macon Sr for his land, forcing his children to flee and robbing the black community of its epitome of success. This act of violence is what sets the Dead family in motion, and it emasculates Macon Sr's male descendants, leaving them unable to believe in their own power or to derive strength on their own from any relationship with community or the earth. Unlike other black migration novels, here "the pivotal murder of a black man is focused not on sexuality but on land ownership... [the black man] is an economic threat. Manhood is... about the possession of economic and spiritual independence" (Griffin 42). When this independence is stolen from the Dead family, it robs the Macons of their manhood. It leaves Macon with his broken dream of acquiring possessions as a means of achieving agency in his world. He tells Milkman "the one important thing you'll ever need to know [is] Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people" (Morrison 55). For Macon Sr, owning land enabled an independent life for his family, but for Macon Jr, this has been distorted into a misguided drive to obtain property as a proxy for power and status. His ownership is for its own sake, and it does not have the emphasis on communal life and folk heritage that his father's stewardship displayed. Macon Jr resolves to live his life like his oppressors because he does not want

to remain the victim, but in doing so, he creates a rift between his family and the black community and gives up their unique sense of self. In reaching for the goal of power and safety, Macon sacrifices the interdependence exhibited by the black men in the barbershop who find sanctuary from their trauma in each other. Macon Jr also blames his father's illiteracy for his death. He says, "Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn't read. Got his name messed up cause he couldn't read" (Morrison 53). He perceives his father's ignorance as a source of weakness, but "Morrison's readers observe how alphabetic literacy, a means to success and power in the external, material, and racist world... alienates these characters from their rituals, their inner spiritual lives, and their oral memories" (Middleton 65). Middleton goes on to note that Macon Sr's ignorance does make him vulnerable to exploitation, but it also allows him to participate in the ritual of naming drawing only "on the power of his own emotional reasoning" (Middleton 66) as he chooses a random name from the Bible, and illiteracy does not hinder him in his desired agrarian life. Macon's distaste for that illiteracy is a symptom of his distancing from his ancestral past.

Milkman sets out in search of the gold mentioned by his father, which Milkman believes was left by Pilate in a cave. He travels to Danville, Pennsylvania, where he feels Southern renewal for the first time, interestingly in a town outside the South. Placing Macon Sr's farm in Pennsylvania may be a reflection of Macon Sr's inability or unwillingness to establish an independent farm in the South, but, more importantly, it is a result of the (so far undiscovered) migration that Macon Sr underwent after the Civil War. Milkman's investigations in Danville are a reconnection with the comforts of kin, but they do not yet plumb the depths of his ancestral heritage, as he will in Shalimar,

Virginia. At Milkman's first arrival in Danville, he feels "the city man's boredom with nature's repetition" (Morrison 226) as he is uninitiated into any kind of appreciation for the world around him. He feels lost and alone until he meets Reverend Cooper, who hears his name and exclaims, "I know your people!" (Morrison 229). The words are cathartic for Milkman:

It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: "I live here, but my *people* . . ." or: "She acts like she ain't got no *people*," or: "Do any of your *people* live there?" But he hadn't known what it meant: links. (Morrison 231)

"Links" are what Milkman has been thirsting for, the ancestral gold for which he is unconsciously searching. He has been missing a link to his past, a link to the black men among whom he lives, a link to the women in his life, and, crucially, a link to his own identity. Reverend Cooper provides a foundation for building these links by independently attesting that Milkman has a history. He corroborates Pilate and Macon's story about Macon Sr; "They had a fine place. Mighty fine. Some white folks own it now. Course that's what they wanted. That's why they shot him" (Morrison 230). This town was the place where his family fortune was begun and later stolen, and Milkman is filled with wonder and pride. Milkman is also impressed by the impact that his grandfather's death had on the black men of Danville. In their shared memory, his grandfather "was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own dying." His farm "colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon... [that said,] 'Stop picking around the edges of the world... Grab this land! Take

it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it.... And pass it on -- can you hear me? Pass it on!” (Morrison 235). Milkman’s pride in his grandfather’s American Dream of owning and passing down land is seconded by these men, who looked to Macon Sr as the evidence that their hard work could pay off. This land acquisition is not the same as Macon Jr’s desire to own “things” for their own sake, but it is a symbol of “the richness and possibility of the community” (Lee 53) that is achieved through the creation of a family inheritance, which in turn enables stability and community formation. One man was able to achieve financial independence through a sixteen-year-long effort of will, and he acquired a farm that he could pass on to his descendants, ensuring that they would be enabled to start life free from dependency on any white person. The effect of this discovery on Macon is seen in his changed understanding of the gold. He tells the story of his father’s success to the circled men, reinforcing their image of Macon Jr as the upholder of Macon Sr’s legacy and as the image of their wildest hopes for urban migration. As he exaggerates his father’s success and withholds the rottenness that oppresses his family, Milkman longs to fulfill his own story. “He wanted to get up right then and there and go get... every grain of [gold] from under the noses of the Butlers, who were dumb enough to believe that if they killed one man his whole line died. He glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride” (Morrison 236). Milkman no longer seeks the gold in order to achieve freedom from the Dead family; he wants to avenge his grandfather’s death and inherit the pride of the Dead name. He still values the gold for the freedom and mobility it entails, not having learned yet responsibility to family and community that may require stability. Milkman has also not yet shed the encumbrances of city life and learned to be in touch with the

land that gave Macon Sr his legacy. “In his ancestors’ world, communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism; when he adopts their assumptions in place of his own, he arrives at a more complete understanding of what his experience means” (Smith 38). Milkman has not yet embraced or understood these values and still hopes for easy financial success, “a sign of [his] continuing corruption” (Lee 53). These men have taught Milkman the satisfaction of reclaiming one’s family, but he must still reconnect with the community and the land from which the Deads have been isolated for two generations.

This lesson proves to be more difficult and less pleasurable. It occurs when Milkman follows the story of his family to his ancestral home in Shalimar, Virginia. Here, Milkman does not have any privilege granted by his family name, so he is forced to confront his separation from the black community. This distance creates conflict when he accidentally offends all the men at the local store. He does not bother to refer to them and makes them feel insufficient in their poverty; “he was telling them that they weren’t men... They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men” (Morrison 267). “They opt to test Milkman’s manhood from their own criteria, criteria which include oral virtuosity, fighting, and finally a familiarity with and a relationship to nature” (Griffin 174-75). The first two are immediately tried during the exchange of insults and fight at Mr Solomon’s store. After this exchange with the young men, his relationship with nature is tested, and he must prove his mettle again by immediately leaving for a hunt with the older men. On the hunt, he is forced to stop, exhausted, and lean against a tree. There, as he listens to the dogs and the hunters Milkman has “his first self-reflective moment” (Griffin 175). He understands his own

faults that have led to his isolation from his family. He begins to understand the significance of the Southern communication between nature and man, that it is the reason for Guitar and the other migrants' affection for the South;

Milkman rubbed the back of his head against the bark. This was what Guitar had missed about the South-- the woods, hunters, killing. But something had maimed him, scarred him like Reverend Cooper's knot, like Saul's missing teeth, and like his own father. He felt a sudden rush of affection for them all... He thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him. (Morrison 278)

This realization and understanding mark Milkman's first moment of "a self-critique necessary for personal growth. This seeing marks a turning point in Milkman's life and in the narrative of immersion" (Griffin 175). He becomes a full participant in the natural world, and that link allows him to empathize with his people. This connection is full and fulfilling, and it is a resource that Milkman realizes is ancestrally linked to the South. Milkman realizes the positive potential that is available in the rural communities of black people in the South. Macon Jr and Guitar are both scarred by white oppression and left grasping to regain their masculinity, "but in their endeavor..., they eventually resort to the same devices of acquiring ownership, and that technique, no matter for what imagined end, destroys the very sense of identity it longs to establish" (Heinze 134). Milkman understands his father's pain; "that [Macon] distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death" (Morrison 300). Milkman understands the the magnitude of Macon's grasping desire is only proportional to the love he had for his own father. Milkman finds escape from these cycles of trauma by learning to understand

his male teachers without resorting to their methods of emotional and physical violence. It is this newfound wisdom that will enable him to understand the song that is the key his identity. However, in this moment of epiphany, as he is reckoning with the lessons of violence learned from Guitar, Guitar himself tries to strangle him. At first, Milkman believes he is going to die, but he manages to gasp a breath, and “it was a living breath this time, not a dying one” (Morrison 279). Milkman tries to fire his shotgun at Guitar and misses, and it is the sound of the dogs and hunters returning that frightens Guitar away. Violence against his brother does not save Milkman; it is the community that rescues him. The moment also imbues him with a new desire for life, transforming him by demonstrating the renewing power of connection.

Milkman leaves the forest a new man and stops to ponder all the pain he has inflicted on the women in his family, especially on Hagar. He realizes that he has used Hagar to satisfy his sexual desire and then to make himself a celebrity, like a “puppet master who had gone off to some other hobby” (Morrison 301). As he is mourning his failure to support his kin, Milkman overhears the children of Shalimar singing the song that Pilate sang, and he realizes it is about his ancestors. He tries to write it down, but has no pencil, so he memorizes “while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again” (Morrison 303). Milkman pieces together the legend of his great-grandfather’s discovery of flight. The song is the story of Solomon as told by those left behind, a critique of the black masculine urge to “fly.” It is also the missing piece of Milkman’s heritage, hidden in the oral traditions passed down by children. He is “as excited as a child confronted with boxes and boxes of presents under the skirt of a Christmas tree. Somewhere in the



pile was a gift for him... He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (Morrison 304). Milkman senses that in the legends that surround his family history is contained the key to living life as an empowered black man. He is connected to this mythic figure who flew by a nearly lost string of names, although as yet he is only proud of the masculine glory of flight and does not yet see the story from the perspective of the women and children whom Solomon left. Milkman’s discovers the Southern importance of names, that “Names had meaning... When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (Morrison 329). He overcomes the trauma that the white official inflicted on his family by miswriting their family name; by rediscovering his ancestral heritage, Milkman makes it possible for his family name to be “noted down and remembered.” “Gone is his failure to attach to place. Now he has roots in every place that Pilate, his father, and his grandparents have lived. He shares that heritage” (Lee 58). He has rewoven the connection to the past that was severed by his grandfather’s death and his father’s separation from community.

One of the most important aspects of this transformation in Milkman is his realization that Solomon is not the only character in the story. Milkman returns to Michigan, excited to share his discovery with Pilate and his father. He immediately goes to Pilate’s house, where Pilate knocks him out. When Milkman wakes up, he knows that it is because Hagar is dead. “While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet’s silvery voice came back to him: ‘Who’d he leave behind?’ He left Ryna behind and twenty children” (Morrison 332). To Milkman, the power of flight has up to now represented the independence necessary for empowered black masculinity. However, he sees that the

legacy of that masculinity is also associated with leaving women and children behind. Milkman recognizes his own guilt as a reenactment of Solomon leaving Ryna to cry forever in Ryna's Gulch. The previous chapter describes Hagar's despair and death after Milkman left her, a demise comparable to Helga Crane's. Both see possibility only within male relationship and affection, and both are manipulated by men who value only their ability as sexual beings. Helga is able to escape Axel Olsen and James Vayle, but Robert Anderson's rejection causes her to make the rash decision to marry Reverend Green. Similarly, Milkman's rejection breaks Hagar and leaves her unable to recover her sense of self-worth outside of male desire. The chapter containing Hagar's downfall is a break in a narrative that is otherwise focused on the male protagonist's adventures and growth. "Morrison interrupts Milkman's monomythic quest... in order to expose phallogentric myth's failure to inscribe usefully transcendent possibilities for the female" (Awkward 109). Although the narrative focuses on Milkman's reclaiming of his masculinity and identity, it does not forget that this kind of regeneration is often not possible for black women because their power is not recognized or validated in their patriarchal society, even in black communities. The symbolic act of flying is important for men, and Morrison "acknowledges that the male's manifestation of power resides in his ability to change situations or places... Morrison finds flying 'one of the most attractive features about the black male life'" (Mayberry 72). It is celebrated in the novel through the memorialization of Solomon as later generations look to him as an archetype of escape. Solomon exists within the legend of the flying African, a strain of folklore that memorialized strong black men who had escaped and returned to Africa, but who left their families in slavery. However, the song is an important shift in the ordinary

perspective of this legend that usually glorifies the escape; the song is sung in the voice of those who are left behind; in it, Ryna sings, “O Solomon don’t leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ O Solomon don’t leave me here/ Buckra’s arms to yoke me” (Morrison 303). Although men are powerful enough to survive independently and make their escape, they often left their families to suffer oppression without them. This is Milkman’s final lesson: true masculinity means learning to fly, or resist racist oppression, while remaining grounded and present for those you love, demonstrating a capacity for empathy, to “challenge the patriarchy and embrace the core aims of black feminism” (Leak 100).

After Milkman has rediscovered the power potential within his black masculinity as well as the importance of using it with love for his newly discovered community, he is ready to return with Pilate to confront the trauma of the past in their ancestral home. They return to bury the bones of Macon Sr, finally allowing his spirit to rest. Their decision to bury him is based on the wish of Macon Sr’s ghost not to be left behind. “His own father [Solomon] flew away. He [Macon Sr] was the ‘body.’ The body you shouldn’t fly off and leave” (Morrison 333). Pilate and Milkman’s return to bury Macon Sr ensures that he is not eternally “left,” a beginning of closing the cyclical trauma of abandonment. Before they leave, “Milkman resolve[s] to carry with him the box of Hagar’s hair: a symbol of his newly acquired cyclical vision of a past he no longer needs to escape” (Smith 39). Hagar’s hair is a memorial of the consequences of flight; it serves to remind Milkman that the past should not be fled, but confronted. They return to the South more whole than when they left, and there they are able to put the past to rest without forgetting the legacy it entails. When they bury Macon Sr’s bones, “a deep sigh escaped from the sack and the

wind turned chill. Ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them” (Morrison 335). There is a spiritual sense of relief as Milkman and Pilate partially rectify past wrongs. By burying his grandfather at Solomon’s Leap, Milkman is finally returning him to his homeland and asserting that his grandfather had a claim on this land.

However, Milkman must also confront Guitar. “Just as the consequences of Milkman’s own stupidity would remain, and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done” (Morrison 335), Guitar is the lurking reminder that the past is never completely escapable. He kills Pilate, the repository of folk memory, in an act that demonstrates the potential for misguided male violence to wipe out folk heritage. Pilate’s death is also the final female sacrifice that preserves Milkman’s life. Milkman refuses to retaliate, to continue the vicious cycle. He is able to look Guitar in the eyes and offer him his life. His grasp of the feminine is clear; Guitar believes that women want the life of black men, and that they must be defied, but Milkman’s sacrifice shifts the paradigm.

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees--he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it. (Morrison 337)

Milkman has finally learned how to confront his past: by facing it. He leaps into the waiting arms of his brother, and the act of leaping is more important than the outcome. Milkman is willing to die for his brother, and it seems that Guitar is willing to do the same. They have built an unassailable link, a brotherly love that withstands the assault of white society, past trauma, and old transgressions, and Milkman’s final act affirms the

value of that bond. “Milkman, who by his initiation into community now embodies that community, leaps not into the void but into the ‘arms of his brother.’ Such a death would be a healing sacrifice of love for Guitar” (Lee 59). Until this point, Milkman has never demonstrated sacrifice. By giving up his life freely, uncertain of the outcome, and to a man who embodies the toxic masculinity engendered by trauma, Milkman demonstrates his connection to the feminine and his willingness to confront and end, or at least refuse to perpetuate, the cycles of trauma that have haunted his people until now.

Morrison’s novel is ultimately a synthesis and resolution of the potential and limitations of mobility for the black migrant. She recognizes the constraints placed upon black women that Ellison does not address. In *Quicksand*, Helga relies upon her mobility to flee societal entrapment until she is bound by marriage and the reproductive tax upon her body. Ellison’s narrator also is essentially mobile, but his narrative ends with a final migration aboveground, a movement that is full of potential both for the narrator and society. Ellison does not question whether that movement’s possibility is limited only to men. Morrison is much more clear; “flying,” or mobility, is “man’s manifestation of power” (Mayberry 72). Women, like Helga Crane, are more likely to be bound by responsibility for children, or at least they are more likely to recognize their responsibility. In *Song of Solomon*, the female body remains under the control of men; Hagar wastes away over Milkman’s rejection, Reba is exploited by men, and Pilate is shot by Guitar. Macon Jr retains executive control over Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians. The promise for redemption in the novel lies in Milkman’s giving up using his mobility to flee his circumstances (i.e. not escaping Guitar) and instead choosing to confront his

situation. It requires men to recognize their responsibilities to family, community, and the earth, as demonstrated by the final burial of Macon Sr.

For Morrison, this male responsibility is discovered within a Southern context. In *Quicksand*, Southern black culture is a mirage that entraps Helga and does not deliver on its promise for community, reflecting the era in which it was written, when Southern black people still lived under harsh oppression without much opportunity. Ellison's narrator does not return to the South. His Southern experience is a resource, but the North is where his voice has the most potential for being heard by society. Ellison's generation of urban migrants relied on a shared Southern history to establish commonality and community, but there was no strong temptation yet to return. Morrison's novel, however, reflects a trend of remigration motivated by improved conditions (Cobb 263-64) and a desire to reconnect with lost roots (279). Because the novel is set in the 1950s and 60s, her South does not overtly demonstrate any improved circumstances, but it does demonstrate the possibilities for healing of historically inflicted trauma by rediscovering African/Southern heritage. Milkman's reconnection with his family's folk history enables him to be a healthy, living member of black community and to reckon with the scars inflicted by past and present oppression. Ellison's South is a resource for survival and reconciliation in American society, but Morrison's South is a resource for the healing of black men and women.

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